# Deep Magic

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# November 2005

As we get ready for winter and the ensuing months of reading fantasy and science fiction under a warm blanket near a raging fire, at least for those of us in the northern hemisphere, we would like to invite you to make Deep Magic your fiction of choice for the season. Since our first published issue, we have endeavored to bring our readers closer to some of the most well-known and respected authors, artists and industry professionals. This month, we include an exclusive interview with one of the legends of the industry. In conjunction with the publication of his eleventh Wheel of Time novel, *Knife of Dreams*, Robert Jordan graciously submitted to a Deep Magic interview.

We also bring you another outstanding helping of short fiction:

*The Ravenmaster*, by our own Jeff Wheeler
*A Pile of Leaves*, by Ian Morrison
*Elvish as a Second Language*, by Margaret E. Welsh

Two incredible artists offer color to our pages: Michael Carnahan, who created the cover and other art within this issue, and Socar Myles, also featured within the issue. Additionally, Greg Keyes and Jeff Wheeler—in two separate articles—instruct the authors among our readership on the topic of writing fight scenes.

Join us this month as we honor and congratulate those outstanding entries from our first writing contest. Back in July, we announced the contest, which invited our readers to write a story based on the inspiring cover art for that month. We opened the contest in two classes: non-staff, who competed for a cash prize, and staff, who competed for bragging rights and the joy of writing a good tale. After two months of voting, the results are as follows:

The winner of the Open-Class writing contest is **A. M. Stickel**, author of the story, *To the Shores of Triple, Lee!*

The winner of the Staff writing contest is **Nicole Sharene Goethals**, author of the story, *A Bit of Karma*.

Look for a compilation of all our staff contest entries, as well as other complete stories, in a downloadable version exclusively compiled for our Deep Magic subscribers. This special edition should be available by the end of the year.

Without further ado, welcome to the November 2005 issue of Deep Magic.

All the best,
The Editors

## Safe Places for Minds to Wander

# Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

## November 2005 Writing Challenge Entries due Dec 10, 2005

The challenge this month is to do what is so often counseled: write what you know. We've all had things happen to us that was out of our control–sometimes good, sometimes bad. This month you are to pick one of these events and write about it. However, you must transplant that event into a fictional world (fantasy or science fiction). The details will obviously change, but the basic event should stay the same. Use first or third person POV with you as the primary character. Let us know not only what happened, but how it affected your life. Since it's fantasy, feel free to be more metaphoric than literal. Keep the challenge to 500 words or less.

## Selections from the September 2005 Challenge

*A Moment In Murkwood*
*Merry Grass*
*Timeless*

The above stories were selected from the September challenge, which was to write a scene set in Kenatos wherein some form of flora plays a central role.

### Don't forget the October challenge due Nov 10:

*One of the things that has made action movies so successful is....well...action! Imagine the Lord of the Rings movies without Legolas and his bow or Gimli with his axe. Can you imagine Pirates of the Caribbean without clashing rapiers? It could be said that in days of old, certain men were more motivated to draw a weapon to solve problems than to discuss it over coffee. The writing challenge for this month is to thrill our readers with a well crafted fight scene. Do your best to make it real, lively, and exciting. In November, we will give you some special help to try and make it even better. We have asked for advice from some of the best fight-tellers in the business (like Robin Hobb, George R.R. Martin, and Greg Keyes) and will publish their thoughts in our next issue. That will give you time to make edits and improvements before the challenges are due. Keep the carnage down to a minimum please–safe places standards still apply–and keep it under 1000 words.*

# A Moment in Murkwood

## By A.M. Stickel

Southwest of Wayland's Endgate, gloom filled the former hamlet so aptly named Murkwood. Instead of the incense of hearth fires, the wayfarer's nose was accosted by the unwholesome stench of foul forest fungi, their deadly black heads supported by blood-red stalks. Nacreous, bile-yellow brackets climbed the rotten, slime-slick trees, a fitting counterpoint to their distorted limbs. An unnatural creaking, groaning and twisting, not born of wind, eerily mimicked the movements of victims hung upon a torturer's rack.

Steenhope the Poisoner pulled his ragged, hooded cloak closer about him as he sidled through the woods on the overgrown path. Over his humped right shoulder his collecting bag, already half full, battered his tired back and occasionally halted his progress by snagging on a fireburr bush or jutting tree branch. The sole survivor of his hamlet, he had escaped his rightful sentence through lies, subterfuge and underworld connections.

The Poisoner stopped at last to lean against his favorite tree, ready to dig at its base for gruetruffles. "Hello, my lovely. Well met, once again." Pulling the hated edict from his jerkin pocket, he held it up to the thornoak tree as if it could inspect the inscription on the leather scroll. "Oh, I forgot…you never learned to read, my dear." He lowered his hood to reveal a pockmarked face, crossed by a slash where his left eye should have been. "It says here that no lone plague survivor of any town or hamlet must be permitted continued residence in Kenatos, by order of King Davtian. Ha!"

The thornoak scraped its dagger-bladed branches together, applauding the Poisoner's shrill laughter. After he wiped his hysterical tears away with the dirty edge of his cloak, Steenhope bent to his task with a sharp digging stick and finished filling his sack with gruetruffles, their flesh the color of corpses. Although their earthy odor made his mouth water, he knew better than to sample his prizes.

"These should make Davtian's last meal quite tasty and his exit from our plane most prolonged and painful. Kenatos will be better, rid of such a ruler. Stinking elf!" the Poisoner muttered, spitting on the gray, nettle-choked ground. Murkwood quieted. The next instant, he was startled by a powerful grip on his hump, a hearty kick at his clubbed right foot, and a nasty cackle.

"If it isn't my old pal, Wyrmwin Steenhope…" The rest of a filthy, weasel-faced figure arose from a pile of dead leaves. Few could rival the Poisoner's ugliness, and the tall, skeletal Rathmer Skrall, aka "Ratty the Runner," was one of them. While he had two eyes, they were black and beady; his muddy mustaches twitched, thanks to a permanent tic, above protuberant front teeth overshadowed by a long scimitar of a nose. Yet, his sharp face merely hinted at his wily mind.

"Ratty? So you're to be the go-between?" The Poisoner pulled himself up from the itch-ivy and extracted an assortment of burrs and thorns from his exposed skin.

"Aye, but one of many, Wormy," acknowledged the Runner, leering in that overly familiar manner guaranteed to make the Poisoner's hair stand on end. "I'd like to stay for tea, but as always, I must be running. Here's your fee, if you care to count it…besides, your tea is not known for its health-inducing qualities."

"I trust your coin as much as you trust my tea," replied Steenhope, hefting the money bag

and then peering within suspiciously. "My real reward will be the news of Davtian's untimely, but most welcome, demise."

The Runner produced another bag, and the Poisoner filled it with truffles. He disappeared more swiftly down the Murkwood trail than Steenhope could dream of moving. The Poisoner sighed in relief, and the trees resumed the creaking chorus silenced by the Runner's presence. He shuffled toward his hut in the heart of Murkwood, pausing to skim the algae from a brackish pond and dip his crude drinking gourd therein. His quaff was seasoned only by the salt of a few tears when he inadvertently glimpsed his reflection in the pond. He patted the coin pouch in his breast pocket then, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Wyrmwin Steenhope shook his fist at the patch of glorious blue sky above, rasping, "I've almost enough to buy the charm for my weirding weed tea. Once I have drunk it, my handsome splendor will shame the sun." Murkwood grew still briefly, as a cloud crossed the sun, and the sky replied with distant thunder.

# Merry Grass

## By Shawn Kirkeby

"When you find a patch of Merry Grass, there is nothing left to do but run through it bare foot. The first step is a delight, the second bliss, and on it goes until the fifteenth or sixteenth step, and by that time it is pure rapture."

"There is something about the feathery softness of the stuff that takes any old ache you might have, anywhere in your body, and just caresses it away. It doesn't matter if it is a headache or a stiff back, all that matters is the gentle touch on your feet, and how it just takes those aches away."

"Then there is the smell. Oh what a bouquet the grass has, a heady smell that takes over the moment it touches your nose."

"The grass starts by numbing the tip of your tongue, which is a little odd at first, but you hardly notice it after a while. What it does next is beyond any feeble words I might offer you here, but I will try anyway."

"When it truly gets hold of you, when it digs deep into the back of your mind, it makes everything better. It gets hard to remember why your wife yelled at you that morning. It gets impossible to remember just why it was you were so beside yourself that it was raining so much when you were trying to bring your crop in. It takes away all of the bad and leaves you feeling like a fella that just got a hundred hugs. Or maybe one real good hug, if ya follow my meaning."

"Oh yeah, Merry Grass is everything you've heard it is. More, if you ask me, and you should. I have been around the stuff almost my whole life."

"I'll tell you what. Since you're not really sure yet, I will invite you over to my place. I have a little patch I keep out back. You pull off them shoes of yours and give it a go. If you like it, we can talk some more. And if you like what I got out back, you will love the other patches I have. This one is only little, you see, and I got a lot of folks runnin' through it all the time. The other patches I have don't get used nearly so much."

"So what do you say, fella? Sound good? Sound like a plan?"

"What have you got to lose anyway? The first time is free."

# Timeless

## By Kristen Noel Walker

The tree rose as tall as the Druid that stood before it, gazing at its blossoms and petals in varied shades of oranges and pinks and reds. The forest was new to the young tree, which had occupied it for no more than a fortnight, and it could sense the Druid's curiosity in finding it there. The leaves decorating the surrounding branches and fragile saplings all rustled and whispered silent welcomes and questions.

Many feet had traversed these woods and never seen trace of the tree, for it only grew once every five or ten years, depending on the rainfall. Many still would stand on this very spot in coming days and see only a dead husk of a tree, colorful petals wilting at its feet; for the tree died along with its vibrant flowers, like a mother who dies of sorrow after the loss of her children. The tree understood that it would meet this imminent fate, but that did not matter. To trees, time was meaningless. A day seemed a week, a month, a year, and yet nothing at all. Few had ever seen this tree, and still fewer knew of the magic that sprang from those magical petals. The Druid would soon discover it.

A soft rain sprinkled upon the foliage, raindrops winding their way through dense branches and leaves and rolling off the flower petals that spread like fingers from the tree's thin branches. The only sound was the subtle drumming of the drops on the ground and the Druid's even breaths. Water did not disturb him, as it did not disturb the great trees of the forest. A single tear slid down the Druid's cheek—though it could have been mistaken for a drop of rain—as one of the tree's flowers withered before his eyes. Still another blossomed next to it, time no inhibiting factor in the tree's cycle of growth and decay.

The Druid reached out and gently picked the newly sprouted bud off the tree, and it opened fully in his outstretched palm, the vibrant colors interweaving and blending across the smooth petals. A single beam of dusty sunlight shone down onto the flower, causing the droplets of moisture to glisten and reflect as tiny rainbows off of the petals; whether from a break in the trees or by some other means, the Druid could not be sure.

In later years, the Druid would find that time did nothing to wilt or discolor the flower. It remained as vibrant and dazzling as ever, and something made the Druid only display the flower in the private recesses of his home. Not once did he show the flower to visitors or friends, for he understood that it was meant for him and him alone. On the day that the Druid departed from the world of the living, so too did the flower give up its endless beauty. The once elegant and timeless flower shriveled up and blackened until it was nothing.

# The Ravenmaster

## By Jeff Wheeler

As the sun first brushed a little pink in the smoke-choked sky, the ravens were loosed from Pent Tower. They fluttered with their hobbled wings over the ghastly siege, and the strong men of the castle raised a cheer that swelled from voices hoarse with screaming, thirsty from drinking muddy water, and brave beyond measure. For the army of Dahomey was blocking the road to Syn Albans and relief was still a fortnight away.

The Ravenmaster of Pent Tower stood on the battlement, raising his black glove in the air, and the cheer shredded its cocoon and became a roar.

* * *

The lad was named Wilmont by birth, but the new scullion girl serving the tower called him Molesworth. It struck him as odd and cruel since he lived in Pent Tower—not deep in the castle kitchens as she did. But maybe her taunt referred to the fact that he slept under the Ravenmaster's wood-frame bed on a mat of woven reeds and emerged from the dark corners each morning to mix the blood and biscuits and liver snippets that fed the ravens of Casta. This he did every morning while the Ravenmaster loosed the birds from the cages on the tower roof.

**The Ravenmaster of Pent Tower stood on the battlement, raising his black glove in the air, and the cheer shredded its cocoon and became a roar.**

He heard the trapdoor thunk, and smoky light descended the steps, hailing the old man.

The Ravenmaster suffered day and night from arthritic joints, wincing as he bent his knees and cradled the cages down, one by one, in his arms.

"Glad you are awake, lad. Come here and fetch Gorge. I don't know why he's so heavy this morn. There's a good boy. Here you are."

Wilmont grasped the beaten handle of the cage, hefted it over to the table inlaid with gold, and rested the burden on the correct pedestal. He slipped a chicken heart through the slats and Gorge snapped it up.

"*More please*," the raven croaked.

"Only one, Gorge."

"*More*."

"Only one. There are the others yet to feed. Don't be greedy."

"*More please?*"

So many in the castle thought that Pent Tower was a quiet place. How could it not be when fowl outnumbered people there? But most days it was frightfully noisy. Each of the six ravens of Casta had different personalities, and two were clever mimics who could impersonate the Ravenmaster's tone and voice so well that the scullions often fumbled around obeying their jumbled orders while Wilmont giggled at them beneath the bed. He enjoyed it when the scullions

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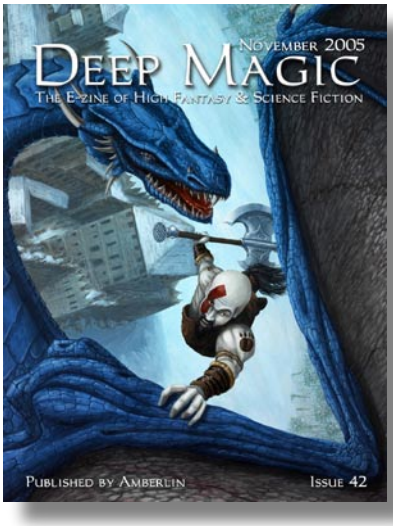
# Featured Artist
## Michael Carnahan




**Age**: 36
**Residence**: Savannah, Georgia
**Marital Status**: Married
**Children**: Two
**Hobbies**: Hobbies, I ain't got no stinkin' hobbies. I think I used to have time for them; see answer above.
**Personal Quote**: I was going to say something profound until I heard a loud crash outside my house this evening and figured this would be more pragmatic: "Avoid large concrete barriers while driving at night."
**Favorite Book or Author**: The Hobbit, only because it was the first fantasy novel I ever read.
**Started Painting In**: Diapers
**Artist Most Inspired By**: Too many to count.
**Media You Work In**: Acrylic
**Schools Attended**: The Savannah College of Art and Design.
**Other Training**: I have been working as a decorative painter for the last sixteen years, which entails painting murals, floors, ceilings and painting all styles of furniture. I also build furniture; and to think I have only run my fingers through the table saw twice.
**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed**: Recently for 'The Soulkeeper' and soon for a new e-book publisher, Sphinx Books.
**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally**: My website (look down).
**Website URL**: http://www.MCarnahan.com

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**
A: It was either wash dishes for a living or paint and, since I have sensitive skin, I thought I would paint.

Q: **How would you describe your work?**
A: Painful. I heard an accomplished author once say he was an uncomfortable writer; he would anguish over every passage but when he read the final version as a whole he was pleased how it turned out. Hearing him was very liberating. As far as style, it would have to be traditional fantasy painting with an emphasis/attempt at realism.

continued on next page

Q: **Where do you find your inspiration?**
A: Everywhere, almost every thing I see I wonder to myself 'now how would I paint that' or 'how does the lighting work on that chicken wing'. I sometimes have to pull myself away from looking at the subject so I can just enjoy it. It's the forest and the tree thing.

Q: **What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)**
A: This piece was done for the upcoming video game 'The Soulkeeper.' It portrays a Degathian slayer, one of the many races in the game, trying to subdue a dragon in order to make it his mount (good luck). The creator of the game gave me the freedom to do what I pleased with a set of illustrations for the game, and while I take all of my work seriously, I try to put a little bit of humor in the story telling.

Q: **What do you consider your influences**?
A: My childhood.

Q: **What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**
A: Well getting this cover and interview is quite the treat. What I have also considered a success is painting for people that are just starting up with a small budget and are really excited about the work. An author just contacted me and let me know he saw the painting for his book and it made his week. That is a heck of a feeling. I would probably work for pleasantries if I didn't keep getting these little white envelopes in the mail demanding money from me.

Q: **What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre**?
A: As far as art goes, digital and dark. Also with the releases of giant blockbusters and bestsellers, more people young and old are realizing that imagination and creativity aren't such bad things after all.

# Thoughts on Writing a Great Fight Scene

## By Jeff Wheeler (with a little help from some friends)

One of my favorite fight scenes in all fantasy was written by Terry Brooks in *Wishsong of Shannara*. It was the introduction of Garet Jax, the weaponsmaster, to the boy Jair Ohmsford. Even all these years later, I can remember the vividness of that scene. Jair was trussed up, a prisoner to a band of Gnome hunters led by a cruel captain named Spilk to an unspeakable fate. Spilk was not a patient man and had drubbed the young man within an inch of his life when they first met. Things were looking to get even worse when the band of Gnomes stumbled across a man at a watering hole. The stranger, pausing for a drink, saw the bound and gagged young man and took notice:

> The stranger moved closer to Spilk. "Why don't you let the Valeman go?" he suggested softly.
>
> Spilk swung the heavy cudgel at the stranger's head. Quick as he was, the stranger was quicker, blocking the blow with his staff. The stranger stepped forward then, a smooth, effortless movement. Up came the staff, striking once, twice. The first blow caught the Sedt in the pit of his stomach, bending him double. The second caught him squarely across the head and dropped him like a stone.
>
> For an instant, no one moved. Then, with a howl of dismay, the other Gnomes attacked, swords ripped from their sheaths and axes and spears lifting. Seven strong, they converged on the lone black figure. Jair bit into the gag that held him speechless when he saw what happened next.
>
> Terry Brooks, *The Wishsong of Shannara*

Another author who is very good at writing about fights is George R.R. Martin. Not only can he write fight scenes from the point of view of the combatants, he can cover the point of view of an observer, as well, and yet still make it interesting. In *A Game of Thrones,* the wily nobleman Tyrion Lannister is abducted by his enemies and sent before a boy-ruler who is not known for his mercy. Relying on his wits, Tyrion insists on trial by combat. As a diminutive, ill-favored man, it looks like he is going to lose against Ser Vardis, but he gambles that a mercenary, a sellsword, will risk his life to save Tyrion's by standing in for him. Tyrion's sellsword proves quite a match, but what intrigued me was the point of view of Catelyn, a bystander, and how vividly the scene was described:

> "Ser Vardis is hurt," Ser Rodrick said, his voice grave.
>
> Catelyn did not need to be told; she had eyes, she could see the bright finger of blood running along the knight's forearm, the wetness inside the elbow joint. Every parry was a little slower and a little lower than the one before. Ser Vardis turned his side to his foe, trying to use his shield to block

> instead, but Bronn slid around him, quick as a cat. The sellsword seemed to be getting stronger. His cuts were leaving their marks now. Deep shiny gashes gleamed all over the knight's armor, on his right thigh, his beaked visor, crossing on his breastplate, a long one along the front of his gorget. The moon-and-falcon rondel over Ser Vardis's right arm was sheared clean in half, hanging by its strap. They could hear his labored breath, rattling through the air holes in his visor.
>
> George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*

And since three is a lucky number, let's talk about one more: Robin Hobb and her tales of Fitzchivalry Farseer, the royal assassin of Buckkeep castle. Even though Fitz is the only point of view character, and one knows that he has to survive the fights (or else there would not be sequels), Robin still makes the fighting realistic and adrenaline-packed:

> I screamed and rolled away from it, tearing my flesh from his blade. I struck back at him, but there was no strength to my blow. I wallowed off the table, my right leg folding under me. It was fortuitous, for it meant that Laudwine's follow-up thrust was high and missed me. I took breath and shrieked, "Run!" at Civil. The boy had folded bonelessly to the floor when Padget let go of him to clutch at his chest. Civil still sprawled there, clutching at his neck and whistling frantic breaths into his lungs.
>
> Robin Hobb, *Golden Fool*

These are examples, in my mind, of what fight scenes are about. We can't dissect them line by line, because the art of writing a fight scene is uniquely subjective. Many of you could probably suggest other examples instead. What works for one reader strains the credibility of another. To prepare this article, I decided to do a little homework and ask some of the top writers in the genre for their advice, and I was delighted by the responses.

> **Advice #1: "The bottom line is that no one really writes realistic fight scenes because real fights aren't written, they're fought. Any description—even the graphic description of a visual recording—will fail to capture what's actually happening. As a writer, my task is to create an impression, to fool you into thinking you've experienced something"** - Greg Keyes

Greg Keyes, author of *The Briar King* and *The Charnel Prince,* even went so far as to write his own essay on the topic, which we have included in this issue in its entirety. I thought his point was well taken that fight scenes cannot be truly realistic. Realism isn't necessarily the goal, either. The goal is to convince the reader that they have experienced it. Keyes is an accomplished fencer. I've been trained in using Chinese broadswords and straight swords. The experiences help us understand the feel of a weapon in our hands, the weight, the speed, the motions. But neither of us have ever killed someone with it before (though I can truly only speak for myself on this subject). I have never been in a life or death situation where my skill with a weapon would determine the outcome. But still, experience and a good imagination can allow a writer to make a reader believe that we have walked that valley before.

**Advice #2: "Write it like any other scene. Put the reader in the place of the character. You appeal to the senses, not just to vision. Everyone describes what you see. There are others like smell and taste and sound. My goal is to have the readers fall through the page, experiencing what happens. It's true regardless of whether it's a feast, a battle, or a sex scene. Smell the blood, hear the screams, feel the fear."** - George R.R. Martin

George R.R. Martin, whom just about everyone knows, gave me this snippet during my interview with him. In his advice, he suggests focusing on the other senses and not just relying on the visual aspect of a battle. In the examples I quote earlier, notice how many of these things were included. The wetness of the blood, the labored breathing, the shouting, the biting of the gag. All are details that help entrench you into the scene. There is plenty of emotion to be felt even watching a fight happen. I recall as a younger elementary school student watching one of my neighbors get beat up after school near our house on a regular basis. It always made me sick in the stomach to watch it happen, to hear the screaming, watching the fists fall, to see my neighbor (though older than me), trudge home sadly. And I remember the day that my neighbor fought back and won and the triumph I felt for him. Even as an observer, there is plenty of emotion that can be captured and made real.

**Advice #3: "Don't try to impress the reader with how much you know about fencing or shooting or any other martial art. Just get the fight on the page with all its heart-shaking energy. I've probably been as guilty as anyone, but I always get frustrated when in the midst of a fight scene, the writer starts getting into the very fine details to show you how much he/she knows. If it's essential to show in a moment how clever the hero is, well, I suppose that's fine. But the middle of a fight scene is not the place to digress about anything!"** - Robin Hobb

What an excellent point that Robin makes. A fight scene should be like the climax of a story and never sullied with extraneous details that rob it of its impact. Focus on the aggression, on the act, on the emotions—let it boil up and spill over. Seize the moment, captivate your reader. One does not need to be a martial artist to make it feel real.

The more fantasy I've read in recent years, the less moved I have been with the quality of action scenes. I've seen some great world-building, experienced wonderful character development and plotting. I've even been impressed with magic systems and the intensity of the power unleashed as foe and hero summon titanic forces of magic to slam into each other. But for some reason, characters have been more likely to *talk* their way through trouble instead of battling through it. There are exceptions, of course. It also seems as if writers are intimidated by the prospect of writing a fight scene. Indulge in the exercise. Practice it.

They say that the pen is mightier than the sword. But if I were journeying any distance into Mordor, I know which implement I would prefer.

# A Pile of Leaves

## By Ian Morrison

He lived on a hillside in a pile of leaves. Not just any hillside, but one studded with oaks, madrone, and the strong-smelling pepperwood tree that people claimed grew here and nowhere else but the Holy Land. Beneath the trees were grassy meadows, green in the winter, blue with brodea in the spring, and golden brown when it didn't rain, which was more than half the year. It was hard to remember any other place.

Jed would drive up soon and take him into town. He'd get his groceries first and then they'd each take a beer in a paper bag and sit drinking on a park bench. He tried to remember which Jed this was. Jedidiah senior was long gone and he thought this was a grandson, but he couldn't remember. Taking a cane from a pile of sticks by his front door, he hobbled down the hill. Jed didn't like to bring his fancy car up the drive; said it dragged.

Halfway down the slope, he stopped in an opening to look out across the valley. He couldn't see it, but he knew the ocean lay beyond the far hills. Maybe the message would come today. He had waited a long time, too long.

The hill gave way to a neglected field edged with coyote bush and young maples. Here and there, a California buckeye pushed out green crinkled leaves, telling him it was time again to watch for steelhead. There hadn't been many in recent years, and it made him wonder what the creek was like downstream. Something might be hindering their mad February rush to the headwaters. He hoped not, but there was no way to find out without going down it himself, and he couldn't do that—not yet.

**It was the same game every week, and nobody seemed to tire of it. They held the bags close around the necks of the contraband bottles, sipping in such a way as to conceal any hint of the contents.**

The creek, swollen with last night's rain, rushed angrily under his bridge. He walked off to one side and eyed the old timbers. He was about to test one with his pocketknife when Jed drove up and stopped beside him. He climbed in, setting his cane in back.

"Hey, sorry I'm late. Old lady Klatch was on the road. She retired this week and hasn't found anything better to do than talk your ear off. How you doing?"

"Doing fine. Maybe now I can get my mail without everybody in town knowing what's in it."

Beth Klatch had been the postmistress in Chap for the lifetime of most residents.

"You don't get any mail worth worrying about."

That was true. He tried to remember when he had received anything besides his monthly Social Security check. There were those letters from a great-granddaughter. She had written him about her travels in some far-off land, but that had stopped a long time ago. She had come to see him a couple of times, and they both kept getting confused about which side of the family he belonged to. Try as he might he couldn't recall her name. She was a student, studying trees—or maybe it was ferns.

continued on page 40

# Interview
## Robert Jordan

**Name:** Robert Jordan (James Oliver Rigney, Jr)
**Age:** 57
**Residence:** Charleston, South Carolina
**Marital Status:** married
**Schools Attended:** The Citadel
**Degrees:** BS in Physics
**Website URL:** There are too many fan sites that are good for me to run one of my own. Try www.dragonmount.com (where I now run a blog), www.wotmania.com, www.TarValon.net, www.Theoryland.com, and www.encyclopaedia-wot.com.

**Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published**.
A: This is a long story, I'm afraid. Here goes the short form. One day I went into a bookshop where the manager and I often discussed books. Rosemary Rogers (a writer of bodice rippers, sort of soft-core porn for women in historical settings) had just come out with a new book, and the manager said to me, "Do you know that she made three million dollars from her first two books?" Now that's serious money today, but back then, it was unheard of. "For that kind of money," I told her, "I'd write one of these things myself." Rimshot, Mr. Bones. A throwaway line, forgotten as soon as it was said.

Only, the next time I went into the store, she told me that a woman had come in who had returned to Charleston to set up a publishing house, and she had told her about the bodice ripper…that I was writing! The woman had run out of cards, but she had left her name and phone number on a lined 3X5 index card. Written in pencil. I tucked it into my coat pocket to be polite, but come on. This Harriet McDougal had come to Charleston, S.C. to set up a publishing house? Charleston? I mean, pencil? On a lined index card?

A few weeks later, I stopped to light up a pipe (shows you how long ago this was; I could smoke in my office), and in the drawer where I kept my pipes and tobacco, I found that index card. Having a few minutes to spare, I decided to call. Well, now, it turned out that Ms McDougal had worked in publishing in New York and on being promoted to Vice President at Ace Books had decided to celebrate by quitting her job, finding financing, and returning to her home in Charleston to set up an imprint that was to be distributed by Grossett and Dunlap. Suddenly, she didn't sound like a fruit-loop any longer. She asked whether I actually was writing a bodice ripper, and I said yes (from that moment, I was) but it wasn't ready to show anyone yet (not having had a single page written). I did try to write the thing, but I soon found a flaw in myself. I had purchased the top selling bodice rippers to reverse engineer their structure, and while I had the story down pretty well, I was failing completely in one respect. Those books were hysterical in the classic sense. Every line quivered with emotion. I couldn't quiver. Oh, for a paragraph, maybe, but if I quivered for a whole page, I had to stop and have a stiff drink. So I burned the manuscript and turned to other things.

About a year after our first meeting, Harriet called me again, asking how I was coming along. I told her that I had given up, and she said that she would like to see anything I had

written, any words on paper at all. So I took her the manuscript of a novel that Donald Waldheim had been enthusiastic about for DAW (up until he withdrew his offer because I asked for changes in the contract). I didn't think it was anything she wanted to publish, and it wasn't, but while I was there, I got into a conversation with another visitor about the Rising of '45 and the Battle of Culloden and how they affected the American Revolution in the South. Harriet overheard this, and the manuscript having convinced her that I could indeed write, she asked me for an outline to a generational saga. The first volume of this, The Fallon Blood, was my first published novel.

As a PS, this Harriet McDougal is indeed the same Harriet to whom I'm married. After The Fallon Blood was published, we began dating and eventually married. Though not until after I had sold two books elsewhere. I couldn't marry my sole source of income, after all.

And, yes, that really is the short form.

**Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?**
A: I suppose I have more contact with my publisher since the internet opened up, and I definitely have more contact with my fans. I've actually just started a blog which is hosted at www.dragonmount.com and mirrored at other sites including www.wotmania.com and www.TarValon.net. I'm afraid I don't know all of the sites that are mirroring it. Fans can post comments on my rather infrequent posts, and while I don't intend to answer all of their comments, we may enter into a dialogue now and then.

**Q: Do you have any favorite characters?**
A: My favourite character is always the one from whose point of view I am writing at the moment, even if that is someone truly unlikeable. Most people like themselves to a fair extent, and if I don't like the character, then I can't make him or her believable. I tend to get far enough into them that I can walk into the house, not say a word, and Harriet will say, "You've been writing Padan Fain today." Maybe it wasn't Fain, but it was somebody you don't want to be alone with if you can possibly avoid it.

**Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?**
A: Aside from fifty-odd years of life including two tours in Vietnam (everything we write is filtered through who we are, and who we are is constructed in large part from what we have lived through or experienced), I'd have to say the novels of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, John D. McDonald, Louis L'Amour and Robert Heinlein along with the essays of Michel de Montaigne.

**Q: What have you been reading lately?**
A: Walter Mosley's new book, Cinnamon Kiss, and the Patricia Highsmith novels about Tom Ripley.

**Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?**
A: Usually eight or nine hours a day, seven days a week. Of course, since I normally work seven days a week, I don't mind taking off in the middle of the week to go fishing or play golf. That being said, I went fishing three times last year and played golf once. I haven't done either this year so far. I intend to get in some fishing at least, come November.

**Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?**
A: I've never reached that point. If I am struggling with a scene, though, I'll go back and rewrite something I had done earlier. I always think I can make it better, tighter, with one more rewrite. But once I start writing, the trick is to stop at a reasonable hour.

**Q: What have been some of your favorite or most surprising questions fans or interviewers have asked?**
A: I've had several young women ask whether they could have my baby. That was certainly a surprise! As for my favorite questions, there are too many to list. Many of my fans really get deeply into the books, and they frequently ask very penetrating questions.

**Q: When are we going to see Moiraine again? (I just wanted to get my very own "read and find out" response, although a detailed answer would be welcomed.)**
A: RAFO!

**Q: The world in Wheel of Time is among the most complex in the genre, how do you keep track of all the details?**
A: With copious notes and a mind like a steel trap. Well, the copious notes, anyway. For example, the file on individual Aes Sedai and initiates of the White Tower, living and dead, is well over 2 megabytes now, and the Aes Sedai General file, which details laws, customs, training and recruitment methods, everything about the Tower other than the people there, is almost as large. What I call the Remember file, which contains everything about individual characters that I need to be aware of while writing them, would run over a thousand pages printed out.

**Q: Do you outline your story-line before writing?**
A: Yes and no. I begin with what I call rambles, noodling about with what I want to happen in the book and how these things can fit together, and at some point I realize it's time to leave the rambles behind because I'm ready to get going on the book.

**Q: I understand you have an assistant, which I'm sure would be a dream job for many of your fans; what are her responsibilities?**
A: Paying my bills, keeping the books to hand over to the accountant, cataloging my books (I have about 13,000 volumes now, and though I try to get rid of some, I can't seem to stop buying them), finding my books from the shelves when I need them, reminding me of appointments, running errands so I can write instead, maintaining the Raw Glossary (the list of every name and invented term or word in the books), and, perhaps most importantly, looking up the answer when I need to know EXACTLY what two people said to one another four books back and can't recall what it was.

**Q: The Wheel of Time story involves beautifully complicated interpersonal relationships, action-packed battles and multi-layered, intricate strategic scheming and political maneuvering; do you have any particular story element you enjoy writing above and any other?**
A: I suppose the interpersonal relationships are my favorite, but I like writing it all.

**Q: Many of your characters' names have become quite popular – a member of our staff at Deep Magic has used one of your characters' names as a middle name for his own daughter (Moiraine); do you hear of many children being named after your characters? Which are the most popular names?**
A: I don't really know which are the most popular, but I have been told by a number of people that they have named children after characters, and they seem to cover the waterfront pretty well. I've even had a few named after me!

**Q: *Knife of Dreams* is scheduled to be released October 11, 2005; how long will you be primarily engaged in its promotion before you can resume a more regular writing schedule?**
A: My tour will run a little shy of a month, after which I can get back to writing full-time. Except for preparations for Thanksgiving and Christmas, of course. We usually have friends staying with us over Christmas, and this year we will be housing four relatives who are refugees from New Orleans as well, so the Holidays will be hectic.

**Q: Are there any particular scenes in *Knife of Dreams* that you took particular enjoyment in writing that stand out to you? Any favorite moments you might hint at to our readers?**
A: RAFO. Heh-heh-heh!

**Q: This being the second-to-last book in the series (according to the Tor website), what are your thoughts about Wheel of Time nearing its end?**
A: I'm just trying to keep the same pace to the end. After that, it's off to *Infinity of Heaven,* the next set of books.

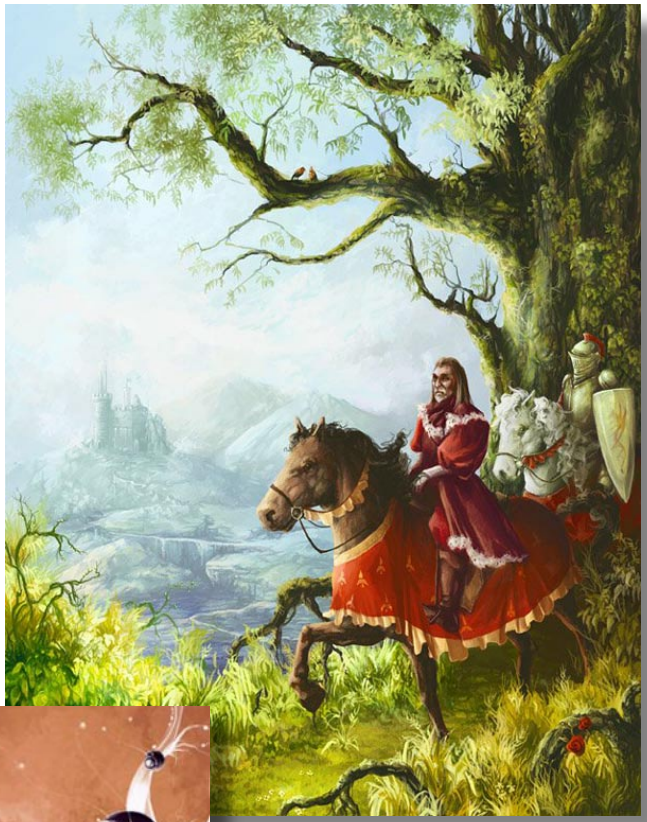
**Q: Once book twelve is finished, are you finished writing in that fantasy world?**
A: Not at all. I've already signed a contract with Tor for a new trilogy, the first of a pair, to be entitled *Infinity of Heaven*. A different world with different cultures and different rules. One of the cultures will be as close as anyone will be able to get to seeing inside the Seanchan Empire, but there will be no connection with The Wheel of Time. I think the same people will like it, though. The world will change, but my writing style won't. Except in that I do keep trying to get better.

**Q: What can you tell us about that project (*Infinity of Heaven*)?**
A: Well, aside from what I said above, I have been telling people for years about a novel that had the working title of Shipwreck, a sort of fantasy Shogun. That volume actually turned out to be volumes two and three of the first trilogy of *Infinity of Heaven*. The trilogy will have some of the things that Wheel of Time readers seem to enjoy, the clash of very different cultures, the difficulties that men and women have in understanding one another. As for the fantastical elements…. RAFO.

# Socar Myles

Titles: Ride at Sundown (left)
The Shivered Sky (bottom left)
Bloodlines (bottom right)

Website: http://socar.epilogue.net/



# Elvish as a Second Language

## By Margaret E. Welsh

From: Lizana Athre, Chief Archivist
To: Repar Tortvem, History Chair, Rhen-li University

While moving the Rhen-li Imperial Archives to our new building, we found the following notes and letters misfiled behind a cookbook. The originals were terribly fragile, but new technology has enabled us to restore and copy them. Alas, we do not have the companion letters. These seem to date from the reign of Glorious King Anthelred and perhaps will shed some light on the establishment of the Westland Fire Wall.

They purport to be from Gentlewoman Alliana Woodgreen, apparently the Elvish tutor for Prince Ethelred, to Thalitza, Lady Winterham, who was Private Secretary to Queen Derinna at that time.

I look forward to hearing your views on these. Are they authentic, do you think? Shall we have dinner one night next week—Linham Alehouse? I buy this time.

**Your Ladyship, I am honored that you have even considered choosing me to instruct Gracious Crown Prince Ethelred in the Elvish language. Please be assured that I will diligently instruct His Highness**

* * *

23rd New Spring

To: Thalitza, Lady Winterham
From: Alliana Woodgreen

Your Ladyship, I am honored that you have even considered choosing me to instruct Gracious Crown Prince Ethelred in the Elvish language. Please be assured that I will diligently instruct His Highness, so that he will be ready for the state visit to The Westlands planned for Old Summer.

As one of only a few humans raised in The Westlands' Court, I will be able to provide information on both the language and the correct social forms. I understand that the invitation came as a surprise, but there are almost three moons to prepare. With assiduous practice His Highness should be able to handle basic social greetings and responses in a satisfactory manner.

I look forward to serving the Crown. I shall send you regular reports, in addition to meeting with and reporting to His Majesty's Protocol Officer.

To have some small part in bringing my birth-nation and Rhen-li closer together—the very thought brings tears to my eyes.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

24th New Spring

continued on page 47

# Writing Fight Scenes

## By Greg Keyes

Most fights are messy and confusing. It's really only after they're over that you figure out what actually happened, and sometimes not even then. That's the reality—as I know it, anyway, both from personal experience and from what I've heard or read from others. Fiction, on the other hand, is—by definition—not reality. So how do these things work together?

As a fencer, I roll my eyes at most movie fencing—but I know people love it. On the flip side, almost no one comes to watch fencing bouts—even at nationals. Why? Because the real thing is difficult to follow. It's very quick, often with only seconds passing before a hit is made. The long phrases of parry and riposte exist only in stage fencing, where the entire point of the exercise is to continually engage the blade in large, flourishing attacks made for the *purpose* of being parried. In fencing—and in dueling—someone makes a mistake pretty quickly. Stage fencing—or karate, or fist-fighting, or gun-slinging—is a dance, choreography meant to entertain. It usually has only the most tangential connection to the real thing.

To go further, sparring—whether it be with foils or gloves, bo-sticks or whatever—likewise bears little relationship to a fight in which there is imminent danger of real harm or death. Facing someone who really wants to hurt you changes everything. If a contest has only one rule—you aren't allowed to kill your opponent—then it is a game, not combat. I'm often asked what form of sword fighting is most like the real thing, would be the most useful in a real fight. The answer is pretty simple—none of them. Likewise, in a hand to hand fight, there are only a couple of things that really work, and if a fight starts badly—say with someone walking up and smashing a beer mug against your head—you don't get to do much of anything.

I'll try to bring this back around to writing combat. There are essentially two ways you can do it, and which you choose makes a huge difference. You can write about it as if you're watching it, or from the point of view of the character doing it.

Scenes written from the point of view of a watcher can be divided into two sorts as well. You can make your observer abstract and omniscient, a sportscaster calling the events from a vantage of absolute knowledge, who knows all of the right terminology, who can not only go blow-by-blow but throw in color commentary. A fight related by the sportscaster, I've noticed, tends to be heavily choreographed, full of amazing moves—stage combat, or stage combat informed by a bit of sparring experience. In any case, the combatants tend to follow a set of rules regarding attacks and counters, and each movement is carefully mapped out to the reader. The fight is an intellectual exercise, a puzzle whose intricate solution is the defeat of one of the combatants. I rarely believe such fights when I read them, but I might enjoy them. I enjoyed watching Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, after all. Dance has its place.

You can make the observer more limited, someone watching something they don't entirely understand, who can't make out every motion, doesn't know the names of the parries. These tend to be more realistic, less contrived and self-congratulatory, but like watching a real fencing match, it can be a little dull.

Combat can be written from the point of view of one of the fighters. Sometimes this is done with the fighter as sportscaster, a guy so smart, savvy and unflappable that he always knows exactly what is happening and what to do. I don't usually believe these, and I don't really like them, but they are appealing, I think, because the reader imagines he could be that

character if he only took enough martial arts.

I prefer to write fights from the first person, and my characters, however experienced, are at least a little confused, often surprised if not in shock. I like my fights messy and short, without long, improbable descriptions of what's happening. Sometimes, for effect, I'll write something more choreographed, but I usually have a point in mind when I do so. Cazio, for instance—a character in my series KINGDOMS OF THORN AND BONE—is a dessrator, something like a fencer or duelist. He likes to call out the names of his attacks, parries, and ripostes as he does them. It's fun, but it's also me poking fun at the idea of the first person quasi-omniscient fighter I was just talking about. Compared to my other characters—like the no-nonsense Aspar White—Cazio seems faintly ridiculous.

The bottom line is that no one really writes realistic fight scenes because real fights aren't written, they're *fought*. Any description—even the graphic description of a visual recording—will fail to capture what's actually happening. As a writer, my task is to create an impression, to fool you into thinking you've experienced something. Different writers do this in different ways, and different readers respond to different sorts of smoke and mirrors. Some people love my fight scenes and some hate them, and most probably fall in a middle ground. Bearing that in mind, I just do what feels right to me.

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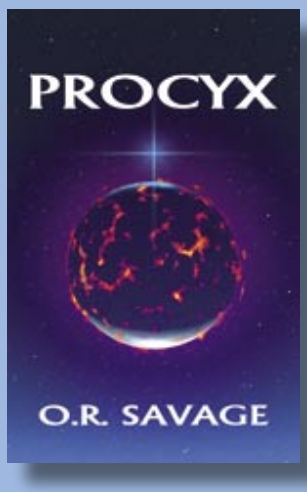


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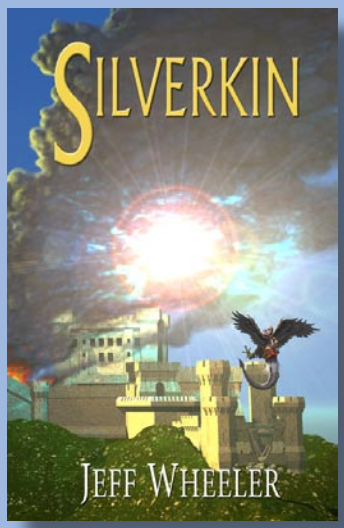


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Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

## Guardians of the Keep
### By Carol Berg

*Guardians of the Keep* is the second in the Bridge of D'Arnath series. It picks up again right where book 1 leaves off, but the scope is much more vast. This story bridges the two worlds, one where magic is persecuted to death, and the other where magic is either twisted or tamed.

The first book was the story of Seri, a noblewoman whose marriage to a J'Ettane dooms them both. The second book takes the point of view of three major characters (and occasionally others). Seri is still a principal character who makes waves as she integrates her life back into her ancestral castle of Comigor. There she meets her young nephew, Gerick, who is also a point of view character throughout the novel. Her husband, Karon—who can only exist in the body of Prince D'Nathiel—is the third point of view character. He must prove himself worthy to rule in Avonar while protecting them from the evil magic of the Lords of Zhev'Na.

Seri's interactions with Gerick are singularly hostile. He does not trust her, for reasons we discover too late. Before she can stop it, Gerick is tricked away by Darzid, a true villain, and taken to the bridge that crosses the worlds. Once there, he is indoctrinated into the ways of the Lords of Zhev'Na and the soulless warriors called the Zhid. Believing himself to be one of them, and believing that Prince D'Nathiel killed his father and his nanny, Gerick trains with all his might to master the dark powers of the blasted lands he calls home.

Prince D'Nathiel (Karon), meanwhile, is still struggling to pull together his identity. When his mentor is assassinated before the job can be complete, he must trust himself into the hands of the Perceptorate—the ruling body of sorcerers in Avonar who scarcely trust each other. Deception and lies are dealt to him constantly as he walks the fine balance between ruling his people and succumbing to madness.

Destiny draws all three players to the wastes of Zhev'Na. Gerick's destiny is slowly being forged by the Lords. In disguise, Seri tries to infiltrate the Lords' castle and free her son. D'Nathiel risks losing his throne to Gerick and must also find a way to break him free, while countless numbers of his people are captured and imprisoned by the Zhid.

Carol Berg has delivered another gripping novel. She has kept the tension high throughout the books, introducing new characters where needed, and developing new ones to fit the new locales. Darzid is just as dastardly as he was in the first book—a truly first-rate bad guy. Paolo is a familiar face from book one, and his role in book two shows his growing importance. The tension between Seri and Karon continues to simmer, making their tragic marriage even more gripping. The only complaint I have is that the pacing of the book tends to drag at times, especially during Gerick's year of training in Zhev'Na. Although the details are interesting, there is a monotony to the days that slows things down. The climax was very exciting, however, and events did not play out as I had initially predicted.

*Possible Objectionable Material: some brief strong language (like when Paolo gets frustrated) and depictions of violence and torture.*

*(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)*

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

## Lord Valentine's Castle

By Robert Silverberg

Unencumbered by any definite recollection of his life up to this point, Valentine, money in his purse and a flask of wine at his hip, finds himself atop a ridge looking across a wooded slope to the city of Pidruid and the Great Sea beyond where, even now, a chariot carrying one of the planet's rulers—also named Valentine—is passing through the gate. To Valentine, the peculiarity of his situation seems hardly worth a thought. He heads down into Pidruid, amazes all with his good-natured ignorance, and joins a troupe of jugglers.

He would be content to tour the wondrous planet of Majipoor in a floating jugglers' wagon, accompanied by the friends he makes so easily, but ominous dreams shatter his peace of mind and put him off his juggling. Dreams, on Majipoor, can be sendings from its Powers and are not lightly dismissed. Valentine must face the possibility that the scenes he witnesses in his nightmares hint at literal truth—that he himself, and not the man before whom he lately displayed his newly won skill at throwing clubs, is the true Coronal Lord Valentine of Castle Mount. Naturally, he is incredulous; and besides, he reasons, if it is true, why should he incite a civil war in a most likely futile attempt to regain the throne and all the burdens that go with it? And if he *does* decide that the usurper's poor governance and the implications for the planetary balance of power—a balance that has held stable for thousands of years—necessitate a restoration, the undertaking is immense: he must cross the vast expanses of Majipoor, convince the other Powers of his legitimacy, and finally scale thirty-mile high Castle Mount, defeating the armies of the Coronal along the way.

Given the continents and seas Valentine must cover—which, rather than human opposition, seem the primary obstacle between him and the throne—Majipoor itself dominates the story. Civilized, cosmopolitan, densely populated by humans and other sentient immigrants, yet kept backward by a scarcity of metal and kept peaceful by the equilibrium between its four monarchs—the executive Coronal, the reclusive Pontifex, the benign Lady of the Isle of Sleep, and the sinister King of Dreams—and by the terrible dreams which hound murderers—Majipoor is a sleepy planet, few steps removed from a utopia: "...a world where most places were happy ones and most lives fulfilled."

As for its invented flora and fauna, passages in the vein of, "...the cabbage trees gave way to dense thickets of singing ferns, yellow-fronded and glassy of texture, that emitted piercing discordant sounds whenever they were approached..." are commonplace. Valentine dodges the poisoned darts of forest-brethren (smarter than chimpanzees but less intelligent than humans), tastes the intoxicating fruit of the dwikka trees they worship, whose black leaves are the size of houses, joins the hunt for the sea dragons swimming in herds around the globe, and contemplates at the volevants—huge, bubble-like creatures, anchored to underwater rocks, whose face-like markings visible just beneath the surface strike him as inexpressibly sad. The sheer creative exuberance impresses.

Immense, wonder-filled, peaceful—Majipoor might make a nice place to live, but those very qualities create problems for a novel set there. It's so large that getting the hostile parties in close enough proximity to strike sparks is itself not easily done—the villain remains offstage to the end—and meanwhile, though Valentine faces conflict both within himself, with his companions, and with the outside world, little of it is sustained more than a chapter or two, and it feels manufactured. Majipoor is such a pleasant, stable, sane world that if the author weren't inventing challenges to throw in the troupe's path—along the lines of waterfalls, murderous savages, and stonewalling bureaucrats—they'd get on just fine.

As an extreme exemplar of the travel guide tendency in some speculative fiction, *Lord Valentine's Castle* makes an interesting oddity. However, its elements, good in themselves—an original world, congenial lead, contested throne, bits of philosophy (on juggling and absolute monarchy)—never fuse into a compelling narrative.

*Possible objectionable content: Nudity and non-explicit sex.*

*(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)*

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

## Eldest

### By Christopher Paolini

In *Eragon*, Christopher Paolini introduced us to Eragon, a young boy who found a dragon egg in the mountains above his home. He quickly found himself wrapped up in the war against the evil king Galbatorix as the first of a new generation of Dragon Riders, the powerful warriors who kept peace in the land before their overthrow by Galbatorix and his minions. Eragon traveled across the Empire with his mentor, an old wizard named Brom, learning the ways of combat and magic and bonding with his dragon, Saphira. At *Eragon*'s conclusion, Eragon finally reached the dwarven stronghold of the Varden rebellion against Galbatorix and helped the rebels win a key battle against the Empire's forces.

Now, in *Eldest*, Eragon and Saphira must journey to the elven city of Ellesmera to complete their training as Rider and dragon. The great majority of the ancient Riders were elves, and the Varden signed a pact with the elf queen Islanzadi that the elves would be given a part in Eragon's training. He sets out with a small escort of dwarves and Arya, a beautiful elf maiden who shows no interest in Eragon's poorly-disguised romantic intentions.

In this book, Paolini introduces a second plot that happens concurrently with the main one. Back in Eragon's home village of Carvahall, the Empire comes looking for Eragon's cousin, Roran, and violence quickly ensues between the villagers and the imperial soldiers, led by the murderous Ra'zac. Roran must lead the villagers in an exodus south to escape the Empire's wrath, dogged by Imperial soldiers at every step.

Essentially, I though *Eldest* was more of the same—if you enjoyed *Eragon*, you'll certainly enjoy its sequel. Paolini's writing, characterization, and plotting are all somewhat improved, but his skills are comparable to those in the first book. The prose is solid, the characters fairly engaging—particularly the dragon Saphira, with her odd mixture of humor, reflectiveness, and ferocity—and Paolini's descriptive passages are excellent, if occasionally long-winded. The plot is somewhat slower-paced than *Eragon*'s, but Paolini's world-building and character conflicts are enough to keep up interest, and it is good to read an unabashedly archetypal story. The way he handles magic is also fascinating—Paolini obviously thinks much more deeply about the ramifications of his magic system than many authors do, and he incorporates the ramifications into his work.

However, I did have a few problems with the book. First, Paolini's battles weren't particularly convincing—the Empire's soldiers, even the elite standing army, were pretty helpless, although it would seem that they'd be better trained, better equipped, and better supplied than the scruffy bands of peasants and rebels who oppose them. As a general rule of thumb, soldiers tend to be better fighters than the average civilian—that's why they're soldiers!—and odds are, with a wealthy government backing them, those soldiers are going to have much better arms and armor than their peasant foes, and that's going to have some effect in combat.

There is also a continuing problem with originality. Some aspects of the world are very well realized, such as the dragons and the magic system, but Paolini's dwarves and elves are quite similar to their counterparts in Tolkien's work, and at times his plot was a little *too* archetypal for me.

My greatest complaint, however, is with the elves—particularly the ways in which they differ from Tolkien's: They're all atheists. And every one of them is wiser, stronger, faster, more skilled, better with magic (in fact, all of them can use magic, while human talent is limited), more artistic, better at singing, and more poetic than just about every human. They're also immortal. I don't particularly like seeing humans so outclassed in every respect.

I personally found Paolini's depiction of atheism in the elves to be offensive to religious readers. He portrays the elves as being superior in every respect to mankind (and dwarfkind), and explicitly indicates that every one, without exception, is an atheist. The meaning I got from this is that religion is always born of ignorance and stupidity, and if only we were all a bit more enlightened there would be no need for religion. The dwarf religion is given a few really preposterous beliefs (i.e., that stone is a living entity) just so the elves can knock them down,

and Eragon's elven mentor even goes so far as to state that he finds the idea of a god repugnant. He trots out a few of the more shallow arguments against theism, and apparently no religious human or dwarf is intelligent enough to have ever come up with any answers at all, although it seems that some elves do goad the dwarf priests into religious debates. Still, aside from that regrettable element, *Eldest* is an entertaining and fairly well written novel. What really makes it worth reading, though, is that Paolini sincerely believes in his story on every page. That makes up for many of the book's flaws.

*Possible Objectionable Content: Some mild sensuality and a handling of religious matters that readers may find objectionable.*

*(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)*

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came, for they brought news from the castle and the country. Except the new girl. She made him uncomfortable. She brought a tongue barbed with gossip and haughtiness. Pretty, in truth, but worse than a pecking crow in how she treated everyone around her. The Ravenmaster was never interested in the affairs of men and kingdoms and several times during the siege had bade her to hold her tongue when she brought them bread and little meat. Though despite his censure of her, the old man carried on about the quality of bird feed since the siege began. How a man could make gossip of molting feathers disgusted him. Wilmont had begun hating him.

"Here's Zig and Black, the two rascals."

*"The two rascals. Zig and Black. Rascals."*

*"Rascals. Fetch the breakfast, lad."*

*"Mop the privy."*

*"Yes, mop the privy. Fetch the breakfast, lad."*

*"Stop sleeping. Stop sleeping, lad. Ravenmaster you will be someday. Yes. The Ravenmaster. Someday."* And both birds began cackling as if they found the thought of it hysterical.

Wilmont grabbed the cages, a little ungently, and set them on the table as well.

*"Fetch the breakfast, lad. Awk."*

*"Awk. The breakfast. Biscuits are tasty. Biscuits are tasty."*

*"Tasty."*

*"More please,"* chimed in Gorge, thrusting his beak through the bars.

Next came Shy and Nevar, and the teasing grew even worse. Wilmont ground his teeth, waiting for the Ravenmaster to come down with Proud. Whenever the master came, the birds' teasing became more respectful.

"*Mop the privy. Mop the privy.*"

"*Molesworth is ugly. Ugly and rude.*"

He struck the scullion's tone perfectly and it made his ears burn.

*"Always a mess. Always so messy. The cook is messy. Messy and rude."*

*"Molesworth is ugly."*

"Here is Proud. The *last,*" the Ravenmaster grunted as he said it, "of this beggarly lot. A princely lot. They eat better than we do during the siege."

Wilmont scowled. "We don't eat biscuits soaked in blood."

"But they are *princely* still. How many ravens eat biscuits at all, lad? Hmm?" He coughed into his fist, his chest heaving after climbing down the ladder, then slumped into a chair by the table while Wilmont filled the porcelain bowls with the ravens' breakfast. Each bowl bore their name.

*"Tasty,"* said Zig.

*"Tasty,"* agreed Black. "*Mop the privy, Molesworth,*" he added with a whisper and started to feast.

As he wiped his hands on a rag, Wilmont saw the Ravenmaster mop his brow, his chest heaving up and down. He tugged at the tight red collar that clasped the black tunic shut at his neck. The uniform was part of the position, and it was different than all the other servants of the castle. And the hat—Wilmont dreaded having to wear it for the scullion said it looked much like a muffin that had overflowed its pan.

"I can carry the cages up the stairs, Ravenmaster."

A shock of dingy gray hair spilled out as the Ravenmaster flopped the hat on the table. The hair was wet along his forehead and nearly black where it clung like black quills.

"I know, lad. I know. The Ravenmaster…you will be someday. Three more years, probably. I think I can go that long. It's just the ladder seems like it adds a rung every fortnight or so."

Wilmont slammed the feeding bowl. "Three more years? The Fearsome Kings are laying siege to the castle. We're down to one ration of bread a day. Three more years?"

The Ravenmaster said nothing about the outburst—instead, he was fidgeting his thumb into his belt band to scratch his stomach as he spoke. "This has not been the first siege, lad. Nor will it be the last, I'm sure. The Fearsome Kings have long wanted to rule our island. I have lived through three others." He scraped his chin, squinting. "And the Ravenmaster before me saw four himself. How odd. Four for each of us."

Wilmont gritted his teeth. The Ravenmaster always seemed in wonderment at the little coincidences of life. To him it was just as interesting examining bird dung for what each had eaten during the day as it was for the stargazers to study the heavens.

"What if this is different, Ravenmaster? What if the castle falls? Shouldn't we be… worried?"

"What is the need in worrying, lad? What is the cause? I worry when little Shy doesn't eat as well as she should. I worry that Gorge might eat himself to death if he ever managed to unclip his wing. Don't you see, boy? The castle cannot fall. Not while there is a raven nesting in Pent Tower."

The boy scraped his fingernail in a groove of wood on the tabletop. He fussed with a napkin, watching the flecks and crumbs spatter as the ravens noisily ate.

"But what if it is only legend?" he whispered.

"What?"

Wilmont shook his head, grinding his teeth again.

"What did you say?"

The boy shoved away from the table and fetched the wax and rag to begin polishing the cages. The Ravenmaster's hand clenched the bone of his shoulder.

"Legend? You think this is but a legend? Boy, have you flax between these ears of yours? Have you heard nothing I've taught you these six years?"

Wilmont stared into the old man's eyes and twisted free the cap of the wax. "I've heard you, Ravenmaster. Everyone in the kingdom knows the story."

"So they should! So long as one raven nests in the Tower, neither the king nor his keep will fall. Lad, this has been the way of it since Chobrid the Wise." He released the boy's tunic and grabbed his own, tugging at the black fabric, wrinkling the embroidered insignia of the raven on the front. "This is my charge, my honor, my *duty*." He started to cough. "I am the Ravenmaster of Pent Tower, as my master was before me. As you will be, if you are worthy of it. You heard the cheer of the soldiers this morning. Didn't you? They look to us every day at dawn."

*And the scullions sneer at you behind your back*, Wilmont thought savagely.

"And you think it nothing that mere orphans are granted this honor? Do you know the misery of an orphan's life, boy? You've been taught to read. You've been given meat and cheese and beer instead of cabbage and soup. Your clothes are mended for you. Our duties are tedious oftentimes, but they are not grueling. Would you labor in the fields like the landless ones?"

"But how do you know the legend is true?" Wilmont scooped the rag across the wax and furiously started scrubbing Proud's cage. "We are sheltered, yes. We are cared for, yes. We handle bird dung, yes! The only thing that makes this different than tending dovecotes is the legend. There are no pigeon masters in Casta. We even kill the crows. How do we know the legend is true, master? Has a siege ever lasted this long?"

The Ravenmaster clenched his fist and for a moment, Wilmont though he'd earned it across his jaw. The old man's lip trembled, his whiskers and beard straining, his eyes red from smoke.

When he spoke, his voice was hoarse with emotion. "When did you *stop* believing?"

Wilmont stared for a moment, then turned back to his chore. "I'm not…I'm not sure I ever did," he said over his shoulder.

He couldn't face the look in the old man's eyes, and he knew it.

* * *

Pent Tower was one of several that marked the boundaries of the royal palace. From the vantage on the roof, Wilmont could see the seeding army of the Fearsome Kings. They had taken pains to hem in the entire fortress, with enough troops at the four cardinal points so as to be able to relieve one another, should the knights inside attempt to fight, and they equipped the river with enough of a fleet to prevent supplies from being ferried in or the king escaping. Though Wilmont thought that escape highly unlikely. It was the main fortress of Casta they wanted. For several hundred years it commanded the only high point along the river, which formed a natural moat around the rear of the fortress. Pent Tower rose from the middle of the wall along that side, well protected and isolated from the front walls and towers where the hives of fighting were thickest.

At best, the King of Casta had three hundred knights defending it. Word had come from court spies that the Fearsome Kings would land in Yuork to the north, and so the army had gone thither to defend the northern portion of the island kingdom. Some ailment had prevented the king from commanding it himself. Instead, the Fearsome Kings had landed in Shereff Hutton in the lowlands and quickly marched on the capital city of Casta herself. The townspeople had fled to the keep, as many as were permitted. But the king ordered the gates closed, for how many mouths his larders would feed was entirely unknown. Rather than endure the siege and starvation, he decided that the remnants would find succor from their brothers in Syn Albans, and hopefully follow the army hastening on its way to relieve the siege.

From his vantage, Wilmont could see several of the Castaic knights down in the inner yard, laboring with the commoners to fortify the keep. Blacksmiths hammered out dents in armor and sharpened swords and spear points. The entire inner court was crammed with makeshift tents from the townsfolk that had been allowed to tarry. He saw a mother wiping her baby's face with muddy well water. Several urchins pelted each other with stones. The air was so dense with smoke from the burning fields around the keep that his clothes absorbed it. Each night as he lay his head on the pillow of his arm, he could smell the stench of it. Smoke had permeated his skin, made his eyes burn, and brought a horrible cough that echoed many chirpings and barkings below him.

He shifted his position, and opened the cage door, but Shy never left unless the Ravenmaster was there. Staring down at a crowd of rowdy boys, he wished he were among them. Though he enjoyed sitting on the roof with Shy, who never teased him, he also knew that the little raven was just a dumb bird. He could talk to her, share his feelings, but all she could do was mimic his words, and she rarely did. Reaching into the cage, he stroked her ebony feathers, then ran his little finger over her firm beak.

A walnut of guilt cracked open inside his heart. Here he was, seeking solace in the company of the very ravens he detested. Of course, he had not been completely truthful with

his master, and recognizing that shamed him. He had believed in the legend as a child. He had believed it when his mother whispered it to him while lighting a candle to frighten off the ticks and bedbugs. Back then, before she'd died, it was an immovable truth. Shy fidgeted in the cage. Wilmont stared at the wall, thinking, and hating his thoughts.

When did the cracks of doubt first threaten his belief? He remembered it vividly. He was twelve at the time, still flush with pride at being the Ravenmaster's apprentice. There were two knights, cavorting with the ladies of the palace. And one of the enormous men had whispered as they passed, "There goes the royal jester and his serf. They smell worse than the privies, do they not?"

"Hush now," one of the ladies had said. "They believe their task is important after all."

What Wilmont remembered most, though, was the look of scorn in her green-gray eyes.

He performed his duties, learned the rules of the Ravenmaster, and settled into the complicated routine of feeding, cleaning, training, exercising, and memorizing that comprised the Ravenmaster's responsibilities. As he did these things, he watched the knights, the scullions, the butlers, the pages, the groomsmen, the shepherds, the priests, the rones, the cryptmasters—he watched them all and observed that the Ravenmaster, the only duty where there was only one man and an apprentice, was regarded generally with disdain, abhorrence, and mockery.

If the legend were true and the position estimable, why did so many ridicule it? It had not been so many years since that day as a twelve-year-old.

The trapdoor jiggled and lifted up, revealing the tawny head of the gossiping scullion. He did not know her name. He was too afraid of her to ask it again. When she first arrived months before, he had been too flummoxed to remember the introduction. He took great pains to conceal his lack of memory, such as always meeting her eyes before addressing her so as to remove any possible confusion that he was talking to her. As the apprentice Ravenmaster, he ranked higher than her in the castle hierarchy, yet with her airs she ranked herself higher than the Queen of Casta.

"Boy. Molesworth. The ration is here. If you aren't going to eat it, then I will. My stomach never ached like this at least in the Dowager's house."

Wilmont wanted to ask her how many times the Dowager's house had been put under siege. But he knew her tricks already. She only needed a little coaxing to torment him. It was usually best to ignore the insults.

She pushed the trapdoor the rest of the way open and climbed out on the roof, ruffling her simple skirts, and squinting at the sky. "The stench is dreadful up here. It reeks worse than the cages down below."

The scullion had brown eyes that were, in color, more like honey. The syrupy orbs observed Shy cradled in her cage in his lap, and a mocking smile turned up her mouth. "So here is the missing one. It's the girl, isn't it? I can't wait to tell the others you've been nuzzling her up on the tower roof. Show me how you stroke her."

He felt scarlet rush into his cheeks. "I was watching the army!"

"Watching the army and fondling the little beast, you mean. Ruffled *your* feathers, have I? How funny. Now are you going to eat your bread, or can I have it?"

"I'll eat it," he said petulantly. "You labor in the kitchens. Like as not you can steal anything that …"

"Drops on the floor? Like a dog?"

"No! That's not what I meant. I meant the stealing part." He grumbled to himself, discomfited. "Don't stand there like that," he said. "The army can see you. Get down."

"The Fearsome Kings? I fear them not at all. I am not a child, like you." She folded her arms, staring out at the army, her face impassive and regal.

"Get down," Wilmont insisted, tugging at her skirts. "A longbow has great range. I've found several arrows up here since the siege began."

"You have? Really?"

"Get down! Or I'll call my master."

She looked down at him imperiously. "Your master is drunk."

Anger flared up inside him. "You are a foolish scullion. You know nothing. It's against the order of the Ravenmasters."

"I know a drunken man when I see one. And smell one. I see them all the time in this castle."

Thoughts and confusion chased through Wilmont's brain like so many gnats bewitching a pond. "You're lying. He does not drink wine. We only get a little beer with our bread, but it's watered down. We take no wine."

She flexed down in a crouch, her nose near his. There were little freckles on her nose. "There is an open bottle on the table." She sniffed at him. "You need to bathe. I heard only the queen is allowed to bathe right now. Think of it. How dirty the well water is, yet they allow her to bathe in freshwater while the brave ones die of thirst." Her eyes narrowed. "He's drunk. Go see for yourself."

"He is not drunk."

"It's no use lying for him. Not to me, anyway. He's passed out on the bed. When I tell the cook, she'll laugh. Fine—if you won't eat your bread, then I will." With that, she ducked back under the trapdoor and scurried down the ladder.

Wilmont's confusion made him dizzy. The Ravenmaster never drank wine. It was forbidden the order. The beer was tempered, so watered down it could do nothing to a man, no matter how much he drank. Wine was for the nobles. He'd heard gossip of servants who had been whipped for sipping from the cups on the trays as they carried them to the lords and ladies of Casta. The maid Ness had said that some nobles etched the inner rims of their cups with a band of gold, to provide a level marker for the wine. If there were any less wine in the cup than the marker, the servant was whipped, no matter if they had been jostled and spilled it. But the Ravenmaster did not drink wine. He had never, not once. He hurried to the trapdoor and went down.

It took a moment for Wilmont's eyes to adjust to the darkness of the upper chamber and his ears were congested by the whirlwind of raven raucousness. His foot missed a rung and wood bit into his knees, making him grunt and the scullion laugh with scorn. Zig and Black mimicked the sound instantly. She was already at the table, tearing a piece of the bread away. She laughed as she stuffed it into her mouth.

"Give off," he snarled, his stomach roiling with emotion.

"*More please,*" Gorge insisted, thrusting his beak through the bars. His wings flapped with eagerness.

The girl, with a twinkle in her eye, licked her fingers and then stuffed some wadded bread into the bars.

That caused the ruckus to burst apart like a sack of flour. Gorge seized the bread, attacking it fiercely like some wounded rodent.

"No!" Wilmont shouted at her. "He's eaten enough! Stop that!" He grabbed for the plate, but she was defter than he and brought it behind her back. She shook her head to get stray hair

out of her face, her cheeks flushed, her honey eyes dancing.

"But I'm hungry," she said, twisting away as he tried to reach around her for the plate. She bumped into the table, but steadied herself.

"*Hungry.*"

"Give it to me," he said, standing so close he could see her swallow.

"What if I don't?"

"Give it to me!"

*"Give it to me. Give it to me."* And one of the ravens made a horrible kissing sound. It was the rascal Black, Wilmont was sure of it. He wanted to strangle the bird.

"Why should I? Are you going to tattle, Molesworth? Are you going to tell cook that I have been disobedient? And I shall tell her that the Ravenmaster would never have allowed that. Unless he was drunk. Who will she believe? Hmm?"

Wilmont ground his teeth, remembering that he'd left Shy up on the tower roof in his haste to come down. Had he closed the cage? Curses and fury, the girl was maddening!

"*Awk!"*

*"Give it to me!"*

"*More, please."*

"Give me the plate," Wilmont said in the most deadly voice he could muster.

The look in her eyes, the total apathy and ridicule, made him burn with shame down to his boots. She snorted, and flung the plate at him. "It would have been more interesting if you'd taken it from me."

He snatched it from the air, too angry to eat, and set it down on the table. And there he saw it—the confirmation of her story. At the edge of the table, in its own crimson puddle that dripped through the slats and pattered on the floor, was the wine.

He stared at it, blinking rapidly. His stomach, already boiling with anger and humiliation, doused like a blackhammer's tongs into a bucket.

"I told you he was drunk," she said in his ear.

Looking at the bed, Wilmont saw the Ravenmaster lying still, his chest heaving. His leg dangled off the end. He was in his uniform still.

The scullion's arm brushed against his as she reached for the bottle. Her fingers curled around the neck of it and he sidled away from her, anxious about her closeness. How strange she was acting. Never had she taken such liberties with her behavior. Never had she…

He noticed the stains on her bodice.

"You are drunk," he whispered.

"What?"

The ravens settled down, rustling in their cages, pecking at the bars.

Except for Gorge. *"More, please?*"

The scullion lifted the bottle to his nose. "Have you ever smelled wine before, boy? I don't know why so many fancy it at first, for it smells like something spoiled." The heady aroma assailed his nose and made him want to gag. "But the taste is pleasant. Have you tasted it? Boy? Have you?"

Wilmont swallowed, a twitter of panic mounting inside him.

"No."

"What?"

"I said no."

*"No. No. No."*

He looked into her eyes, into the honey swirls, and felt the sense of panic turn into a lurch. Her lips were wet. Her forehead was bedewed with sweat. She smiled at him, her teasing, mocking smile.

"You've never even tasted it? Then I shall pour you a cup. Or do you still drink from the raven bowls?"

He tried to speak, but he couldn't.

She fetched a chipped cup from the table and filled it. "You never forget the first taste, boy. Bitter at first. Sour, yes. But it truly is the drink of kings. You are the King of the tower. No longer the Mole. Drink it."

Part of him hungered to please her. Part of him desired nothing more than to flee.

"I won't," he stammered. "I…I've been taught…it's that the Ravenmaster is forbidden to drink…"

"What do you fear? That you might like it? Drink. Just a taste."

Her eyes darted to the bed when the Ravenmaster groaned and stirred. Wilmont wished his master would awaken. But no, the old man only wheezed once and fell quiet again.

"There is no one here but us," the girl said. "I won't tell cook that you did."

"I know, but…I'm not supposed to…"

"I will not tell. Shall we share a secret, you and I?"

He wanted to believe her. He wanted to taste the wine. There was something in her disheveled look that was so appealing. His heart thundered in his chest. Dizziness and thirst in his throat. His knees started to tremble.

She pressed the cup to his chest, then raised it up to his chin. Then to his mouth.

Why? Did she want to get him in trouble too? If she and the Ravenmaster were drunk, they would be punished. A whipping was no small thing. There was blood and bandages and stinging poultices. And how could he forget what a gossip she was? A promise sworn in a stupor would not be honored later, if at all. A secret shared? Why? Yet there was something else—something deeper reason that made him balk. Not fear of punishment. It was duty.

Something snapped inside of him. He batted the cup away, violently, and thrust her back. There was wetness on his lips; they tingled and burned. The taste and smell were horrible. The wine sloshed and doused her. She flung the cup down.

"You oaf! Look at me!" She pulled some of the sopping garment from her, the expression on her face too baffling to discern. At first, he thought he had seen triumph in her eyes, but now he saw vicious anger.

"Leave," he told her coldly.

"I will not. You've ruined my clothes! Look at me. I'll be whipped."

"That may be. You should not have drunken it yourself. My master will be whipped as well. Or worse. So be it. But you must leave the Tower. Now."

"You are cruel, boy. Cruel! Let me clean my clothes, at least. You have a little water? If I rinse and scrub, I can get the stain out." Her fingers shook as she began unthreading the bodice strings.

"What are you doing? I said to go!"

"I can't clean my dress while wearing it. Go wait on the stairs. It won't be but a moment. Please, boy. I won't tease you any more. I promise. I'll bring you extra food from the kitchens. Please, don't let them beat me. I saw the lashes when Noassi was whipped. Please, you must have compassion. I'll only be a moment, I swear it. Only a moment. Let me just clean this."

She began tugging off her dress, frantically, and Wilmont—dazed by what had happened—

fled the tower before his eyes feasted on any more of her.

He ran down the steps, his mind's eye whirling with the events. What had happened? What was going on? Why was she acting like this? The rhythm of the stairs came at him reassuringly. But then he stopped himself, nearly stumbling in the effort to halt.

The rules of the order.

The ravens must never be left unprotected.

But what would a silly scullion do to the birds? She was so frantic to avoid punishment, she wouldn't have time to…to…to what?

His breath was harsh in his own ears. And then he remembered that he had left Shy's cage open on the tower roof.

* * *

Wilmont shielded his eyes as he pushed at the door. It was locked.

Something inside him lurched and tumbled down his chest to his toes like a brick crashing to the bottom of a long stairwell. As he peeked through the gap of the keyhole, he expected to see the scullion in nothing but her shift, using his drinking water to purge the stain of the wine. He did not expect to see her murdering ravens with a dagger.

Dumbstruck, he gasped.

She had not removed her gown, though several bodice strings must have torn in her haste to convince him. The slender dagger in her hand impaled Gorge. The other birds were feasting on crumbs, fluttering in the cages, unaware of the danger.

The pegs slid into nubs in his mind. The scullion was a spy.

There were only three keys to Pent Tower. One was around the neck of the Ravenmaster who lay on the bed. The other belonged to the king's yeoman who inspected the towers at every season change. The third was on a cord around Wilmont's neck.

He fit it into the lock and turned it swiftly, his hands trembling as if he had the palsies. He opened the door and his eyes met hers, and what he saw there was cruel.

"I didn't think I would fool you long, boy." She had already yanked the dagger from Gorge's stiffened carcass and plunged it into another cage, transfixing Black before he could mimic her voice. "Not when you had resisted me. But I thought you would bring soldiers with you. Very foolish of you to forget them."

His throat parched and he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, stuffing the key into his pocket. His knees trembled as he entered the chamber. He knew he could run down the tower steps and that his screams would eventually fetch the soldiers standing guard at the base. But he also knew that the ravens of Pent Tower would all be dead before he reached the last step.

She plucked the dagger from Black's breast and grabbed another cage as Wilmont gathered his courage. His mind was nearly numb from shock, betrayal, from fear and inadequacy. None of these things mattered at the moment. The keep would fall if all the Ravens perished. He knew it as certainly as he knew that nightfall was quickly descending past the veil of smoke outside. Legend or not, the soldiers would lose heart if the ravens failed to greet the skies at dawn. A spy. A Dahomey spy. How amidst all the ashes was he going to stop her?

There was no time for tactics. No time for wayward thoughts. He did the first thing that came to mind, and that was throw one of the heavy feeding dishes at her. The crockery thunderclapped behind her. She ducked. Another bowl, then a cleaver from a wall peg sailed at her. He lunged for anything he could put in his hands and hurled it at her with all the spite and

energy he could muster. A ladle, a soup spoon, a chipped stein. All the while he angled around the large center table, trying to get at one of the cages.

She dodged another bowl and grabbed the next cage, plunging the dagger into Zig.

"No!" Wilmont heaved a cauldron at her, which she easily avoided. She lunged for him next, grabbing a fistful of his shirt, and the knife came down. Somehow, he managed to block her forearm, his bones jolting with pain from the impact. She hefted again and Wilmont pulled away, dragging her against the table. Her grip was like iron and he saw the knife flash once, twice.

Pain slit down his arm as he tried to block it and failed. Blood spattered in his eyes, stinging, or was it sweat? They were nearly the same weight, he realized, and grabbed her arm and shoved her back into the ladder. Another slash cut across his shoulder. He felt the skin open like a fireprick, but his heart was hammering too much to feel any pain.

He screamed for help, pulling the sound from the depths of his stomach. He saw her eyes flick towards another cage and she feinted at him before grabbing Nevar's cage. He lunged at her as she swung it around, smashing it against the side of his head. Lights dazzled in his eyes and his knees buckled. He couldn't see her, couldn't see what she did, but she heard the little squawk as the raven died. Gorge, Zig, Black, Nevar. Dead.

His eyes barely cleared in time to see her go for Proud's cage. No, not Proud! Sputtering, Wilmont grappled at her skirts and managed a fistful of them. He was quicker than she that time, managed to pull himself up and cause her balance to falter in the same instant. He took advantage of the moment and crushed her against the table, watching the knife skitter away and flop to the floor on the other side. She was like a wildcat as he struggled to clasp his hands in front of her, squeezing his own wrists. He heaved her up, jerking her body away from Proud's cage.

She gyrated, cursing in a language he didn't know, kicked against the table and he suddenly lost his footing and went down again, still clutching her. He squeezed as hard as he could, but he was tiring quickly. Her smothering hair tickled his face, filled his mouth, and he lifted his chin to gasp for air. The motion saved his life, as her head came cracking back against his jaw instead of his nose. Then one of her arms was free and he felt her nails raking towards his eye. He grabbed her fingers to stop it, which broke the grip.

He covered his face as she twisted free. Their faces were so close he would see the flush of her skin, the sweat sheen on her cheeks, smell the breath of her that had no hint of wine in it. There was a desperate look in her eyes—a fear of failing. His sleeve was soaked with blood.

Then she left him, and raced for Proud's cage.

Wilmont stumbled as he tried to stand. He charged after her as she hurried to unlock the cage. He was ready this time as she swung it around to crush his head again. He dodged it, but the cage crashed to the ground, bursting it open. Proud cawed shrilly, flapping his wings, rising above the broken cage, confused, free.

She grabbed at the raven once, twice, then managed to seize one of his wings. A quick jerking motion and the bird flopped to the ground, still.

Wilmont flew into a fury, not caring for himself. He wanted to dash her head against the floor. He wanted to choke her. All the beauty he had seen in her lush, mocking smiles faded into cinders. All the pent up desire for her he had secreted in his heart was as empty as Proud's cage. He grabbed her, snatching at her sleeve, and raised his fist back to strike.

But she was trained in the ways of war much greater than the boy from Pent tower. An opening was all she had needed. His fist in her clothes. It happened so fast. Her thumb pressed against the back of his hand and then she peeled his fingers away, twisting his wrist in such

a cruel way that he felt his arm go numb and somehow, impossibly, he was spinning down to the ground, his arm ratcheted up behind him, until he felt the bone break. The feeling of it, the horrible feeling of it. The agony that washed over him in a miasma. He screamed, sick to the core, awash in anguish. And he vomited from the pain. Then she kicked his back, kicked his stomach, kicked his head.

Bunching up tight was all his could do, and it was not enough. She could have stamped him to death, but he knew she had a higher mission. His attacker broke off and went for the ladder rungs. They both knew that Shy's cage was still at the top of the tower.

Wilmont sobbed and choked. His left arm felt like a burning stump. While raising his head, he saw the smear of blood on the floor where his cheek had been. She was almost to the top, her skirts thrashed and torn, bedecked with scars from the violence of their fight. His lungs heaved with emotion, of loss, of despair, but he clenched his teeth and willed himself to stand. Somehow, his legs obeyed. Then, one-handed, he grasped the ladder rung and started up after her. The scullion. The spy.

The trapdoor came down heavy, but he batted it up again with his good arm, not caring what noise it made, sick with fear that he was already too late. Dusk was settling over the ancient Castan fortress. And Shy lingered in her cage still, even with the door left open. His heart throbbed when he saw the little raven. The spy was already there.

"Fly! Shy, to me! Fly!"

The spy seized the cage, her skirts flapping with a wind gust.

"Fly! Fly!"

The little bird only answered to the Ravenmaster. She was just a dumb little thing anyway. But somehow, she knew. Somehow, she heard something in Wilmont's voice that attracted her.

"*Ravenmaster*," she croaked and flew out of the cage as the spy lifted it.

Wilmont scrabbled to his feet, his hand outstretched, and Shy lit on his finger. There was a wild rage in the girl's amber eyes: glaring tortured hatred at the raven, her fingers tightening into taut bands around the empty cage. Using a motion he had witnessed the Ravenmaster use countless times, Wilmont flicked his wrist and sent her to the safety of the skies. "Fly!"

Black feathers exploded in a ruffle and she was soaring up in the air, swooning with the gusts of wind levying her. The spy from Dahomey stared up at the weak bird as she escaped, her mouth twisting with words yet to be spoken.

Wilmont knew he had only a moment to act. Shy's wings were hobbled. She would not stay airborne long.

He rushed the girl as hard as he could, shoving the cage and her. Panic in her eyes, a shrill shriek of fear before her back struck the edge of the parapet wall. He had fixed his course on the toothed gap in the battlement as well as he could. The shove had unbalanced her. When he pushed again, she fell.

Panting and sobbing, he watched as she plummeted and struck the casement below. Only then did he sag to his haunches, wrap his arm around his knees and weep bitterly even as Shy fluttered down next to him.

* * *

"Wake him."

A horrid stench filled Wilmont's nose and he gasped and revolted from it. His arm was

bound to his side, wrapped in splints and bound with thick bandages. He recognized the bed. He recognized the table, though it was strangely askew. Never before had he seen so many men inside Pent Tower. The room was brimming with them.

"Do you hear me?"

Wilmont found the speaker to be the king's yeoman, sitting in an ordinary chair butting up against the bed frame, the gold threads of his tunic glinting from the lamplight. The yeoman's hair was long and graying at the edges, as well as his short beard and round, bulbous nose and furrowed brow.

Wilmont's voice failed as he tried to speak.

"Water. Fetch me water."

He raised the cup and Wilmont took it, drinking it down. It was clean. It was fresh.

"Are you ready, lad? It is almost dawn."

"Ready?" Wilmont asked, his mind throbbing with memories and pain.

The only sounds in the tower were the men rushing to and fro. No chirps or caws. He saw Shy in a cage on the center of the table, pressing her beak through the bars at him.

"Release the raven, boy. It is almost dawn."

"But the Ravenmaster…"

The yeoman shook his head, his frown very telling. "Yes, well, he's dead and can't likely perform the task now can he? They are waiting for you, lad. The knights. They know something happened here tonight. They are watching for the dawn and they are watching for you."

"He's…he's dead?"

"Quite so. A dagger thrust into his back. Just in the right spot to kill him slowly. I'm sure you watched him fidget a bit as he died and the smell of the wine convinced you the girl's tale was true." He rose from the chair and waved around the room. "And what a tale this room whispers! I've pored over it a dozen times tonight, retracing what happened. I can scarce believe it." He turned back, pointing his finger at Wilmont accusingly. "Yet you did not drink of it. By the stains on her bodice and shift, you shoved the poisoned wine back at her." A grin appeared on the yeoman's face. "Even the chairs witnessed what happened here tonight. The crockery on the floor speaks to your defense. Five birds dead, yet the sixth got away." He approached Shy's cage and stroked it with a gloved finger. "Truly you are the Ravenmaster now."

Wilmont's heart nearly burst. The Ravenmaster was dead. So were most of his charges. "I have failed," he whispered. "And Shy has never been the strongest. What if she dies too? What if…"

"To the grave with all that rubbish, boy! Do you see it as failure? I think not. Nor does the king. What more loyal steward is there among this entire household? We train our knights not to be fooled by the Dahomey spies. Yet they were. Oh, we know who has betrayed us, and the Dowager will earn her due for sending the spy here. An intricate plot, to be sure. Paid and fooled we all were, but not you."

"No, but I thought she was a scullion. She came from the Dowager…"

"I know this already. I've questioned each member of the kitchens. She came to these shores before the war. Her goal was devious and specific. She earned a position in the keep's household through the Dowager's connection. She waited for the siege to come, waited for the stocks to run low. Soldiers say they saw her at the top of the tower and they admired her streaming hair instead of suspecting her motives. She wooed us all. No doubt the armies of Dahomey were watching for her as well, to know that this would be the dawn when no ravens would soar above Pent tower."

Wilmont's throat clogged. His heart beat furiously in his chest.

The yeoman came back to the chair, folding his arms as he sat. "But a boy…barely a man…thwarted her. The only thing these broken dishes, that shoved table, your bloody shirt cannot tell me is why. But I suspect the answer all the same."

The trapdoor creaked open. "Master Yeoman, it is the dawn."

"So it is," the yeoman replied, looking at Wilmont expectantly.

Wilmont swallowed. His legs scarcely worked as he mounted the ladder steps. Memories were still too fresh. Still too painful. The air was above was cool, yet salty with smoke. A knight handed him Shy's cage, and there was no scorn in his regard.

The sun blushed and the raven was loosed. Shy fluttered with her hobbled wings over the siege and the strong men of the castle—along with the scullions, the butlers, the pages, the groomsmen, the shepherds, the priests, the rones, and the cryptmasters—lifted their voices in a cheer that swelled from far below.

The Ravenmaster of Pent Tower stood on the battlement, raising his black glove in the air and the cheer shredded its cocoon and became a roar.

Less than a fortnight later the army arrived from Syn Albans. But the Fearsome Kings of Dahomey had already fled.

# The End

*A writer since high school, Jeff Wheeler published a fantasy children's story, The Wishing Lantern, in 1999. He was born in New Jersey but grew up in Silicon Valley in California. He attended San Jose State University and graduated with a bachelor's and master's degree in medieval History. He continued his education and completed an MBA in 2001. He and his wife Gina currently reside in Rocklin, CA. They have two daughters and a son. He is the author of LANDMOOR and SILVERKIN.*

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"Drop me at the bank first." He fell back into the safety of their routine. It was the first week of the month, and he'd cash his check and do a week's worth of shopping. Jed would pick him up and they would drive to the park, and when the weather was nice, like today, they would sit on a bench and drink a beer. He never asked Jed what he did during the hour he fought his grocery cart through the store. But when he was finished and standing in the airfield-sized parking lot, Jed would be there. It happened today as always.

They arrived to the empty park and took their favorite bench. He thought perhaps it was time to change this routine.

"Jed, how long we been coming here. Like this I mean, sitting and taking it easy?"

"Ever since I got laid off at the mill. Must be fifteen years now, maybe more."

"Good afternoon, gentlemen." It was the crisp voice of Officer Sanchez.

"Hey there, how's it going?" They smiled and greeted her in unison like schoolboys. It was the same game every week, and nobody seemed to tire of it. They held the bags closed around the necks of the contraband bottles, sipping in such a way as to conceal any hint of the contents. Officer Sanchez pretended to be engrossed in everything else. She had short-cropped black hair, bright eyes and looked good draped out in police paraphernalia. He liked her. She had patience. She knew how to look at the world. There was something about her that reminded him of Rosy.

"What's new?" Jed always wanted to hear the latest.

"Oh, not much." And then it all came out in a burst as if she had been saving a week's worth of news just for them. "You probably heard about the big robbery over in Peachet last Thursday. Three guys hit the Federal Bank for a bundle."

He nodded, as was required, and tried to show interest. Jed was riveted. She went on to describe every rule infraction and bizarre event that had come to the attention of city police for the past week. "…through the guard rail and down into the creek right there near Timmert road—you know, where the old hop kiln used to be? Landed upside down, smack in the middle. That's near where you live, isn't it, Carlos?"

It was, and now he wished he'd been paying attention.

"How did it get in there?" He knew it was a stupid question and he instantly regretted opening his mouth.

Officer Sanchez smiled. "Carlos, use those big ears of yours. Lost his brakes, can't turn a big cement truck like that very easily. Sheriff's boys got the body out last night and the truck should be out today."

"Is it blocking the creek, you know—like a dam?" They were both looking at him.

"Naw," Jed waved a hand, "if it was, half of Chap would be flooded."

That was the end of the police report and the conversation wandered aimlessly, until by some mysterious internal clock, Officer Sanchez knew time was up. Pushing her slight frame away from the railing she was leaning against, she ambled off. "Take your empties home, boys."

Jed seemed unusually quiet on the drive back. "Ever consider how lucky we are to live in such a wild and beautiful spot so close to the city?"

He had taken that, as well as many other things, for granted. Working his mind around it, he saw it was unusual and steered the conversation to safer ground. Soon they were back on the canyon road that curved along the creek. There were more cars now, people driving over to the Valley on a Friday afternoon. They passed the few houses between the highway and his bridge and then were in the flat at the foot of the hill. Jed helped him with the bags, but he stopped him at the forking madrones above the field.

"Leave them here, Jed. I'll manage fine."

"O.K. Got to be getting back anyway. See you next week."

They said quick good byes. Jed never looked back as he walked to his car.

The pile of leaves stood higher than a tall man, and much taller than Carlos. Standing inside, he was only dimly aware of the mesh that held it up. He had started with that chicken wire long ago. That was after Rosy died and the grown children and grandchildren stopped coming around, or as he suspected, forgot about him. Then the fire had taken everything but the barn. He had salvaged two windows and a door, which he had set into the walls of the growing pile.

There was a table, a low chair, and a sleeping pad all resting on a dirt floor. He swept it every day, stirring up the scent of linseed. In a tight cabinet in a corner, he kept his food. When he had finished putting things away, he took an old bucket and walked back to the spring. Dug into the hill years ago, it was his only source of drinking water. He filled the pail, being careful to avoid twigs and leaves, and was reminded again that he needed to build it a proper cover. Back inside he put some dishes to soak.

Sitting at the table, he reached back in his mouth and pulled the bright gold cap off a wisdom tooth. Between his thumb and index finger, it split into two parts, like a miniature puzzle box. A bright BB rolled out to rest in his palm. He set it on the table and pressed gently with a finger. It sprang into a perfect tetrahedron. Balanced on one of its four delicate points, it bounced a faint light off the leafy walls. A solid mass of turquoise filled the bottom quarter of the form—the rest was clear. He saw, without surprise, that it had not changed. Only on his home planet would it grow to its terrifying potential. It comforted him now as it often had in the time without Rose. Only two charges remained and he was saving them for the trip back. This had been his part of the deal and he didn't regret it at all. But he wished they would get here. The memory of that distant day burned, always...

* * *

*"You have the easiest part, Karro, and you're good at it. A short vacation on a fringe planet and we've done it. When the heat's off and everyone forgets, we sell the little beauty on the free galactic market for a fortune. Nothing could be easier."*

*His older brother was persuasive and after some prodding, he had agreed to hide the TetStar, that synthetic gems of gems. But he wasn't happy about it.*

*"Look, Jarn and Linok and I take the risks." Mik had said, gesturing toward his two friends. "We have to get it out of the palace and then out of the city. All you do is wait for us somewhere safe. Then you take it and use its energy to transport yourself away and hide. When the time is right we'll come and pick you up; couldn't be simpler."*

*Karro might have been a dreamer and a wanderer but he wasn't stupid. He took extra precautions. He replaced his largest back tooth with a clever gold compartment. He picked a hidden mountain pass as the transfer place and told no one where he was going.*

*Jarn had complained, "We need to know exactly where you're going so we can find you,"*

*"At the transfer I'll tell you." Even Mik couldn't get it out of him.*

*The mountain pass was miserable at any time, but the day they walked off with the Gem of Gems, it was a savage place. The wind beat on them like a drum while the cold left exposed body parts red and raw.*

*Karro enjoyed it. He felt safe in this vast wilderness and smiled at the others' discomfort. There were clumsy hugs of congratulations all around and then Mik presented him with a small*

*metal box. He carefully buttoned it away. In exchange, he handed over a disk with numbers indicating the star and planet where he was going. A second set of numbers showed where they should land and a third in what season.*

*"This is close to shore but still over deep water so you can bring a small ship down with no trouble. There's a list of things to bring."*

*"But where will you be exactly?" It was Jarn.*

*"When you arrive, send out a signal; specs are right there on the disk, and give me at least ten of that planet's rotations to reach you."*

*"It would be so much easier..." It was Linok this time but the wind took his words.*

*"Karro, be careful on this other world. There is energy to get you there and a little left over, but not enough to get you back."*

*"I know, my brother, but don't worry. I've researched the planet carefully. It's a gentle place out in the backwater of the galaxy. Listed long ago but never contacted. I know I'll like it. Just make sure you have a ship that can reach me."*

*"I will be there." With a final hug, he wrapped his mind around the gem and disappeared.*

* * *

They should have come by now. He couldn't push the thought away any longer. Something had happened. He sat in front of his leaf pile and listened. This was his primary activity. He heard a titmouse sing its last chickadee like song of the day and tree frogs calling from a seep nearby with voices twice their size. A flock of noisy crows flew over, and later he heard the labored wing beats of two ravens as they muscled their way up the canyon. Still he listened. Crickets and other unknown members of the insect world hummed softly. A pygmy owl sent forth a cascade of whistled notes, one after the other like the cars of a freight train. And still he listened. It was darker now and he heard the last muted whistles of a bluebird. Far up the canyon, deep and booming, came the call of a great horned owl. But the sound he yearned for, echoing half forgotten in his mind, was never there.

He stood and walked rapidly up to the first ridge. He was only slightly out of breath when the twisted oaks became firs. They in turn gave way to low-growing chamise, manzanita, and the spiky chaparral pea. Still he climbed, and the stony ground became dotted with chia sage. The pungent smell brought memories. Rose had tried to grow it around the house, but it liked the wild desolate hillsides and never lasted more than a season. He picked some leaves to take back. Always as he listened, he gathered leaves. They reminded him of the forests where he had grown up.

He was no longer old. Sitting on a flat rock, he paused to admire the distant lights. They blazed up silently from a thousand homes strewn across the valley floor. Far to the north, he could see the dull glow of the city. Coyotes began barking and yipping somewhere on the mountainside. Once he had squandered some of the precious energy to change and run with them. He could still remember the excitement of the hunt, the rich smells, the endless running, the wonderful feeling of belonging; it had awed him for days. The chorus stopped and he knew they were off, scouring the mountainside, the valley, and who knew where else. At dawn, if he was awake, he would hear them again, laughing out the night's adventurers to anyone who cared to listen. Mysterious creatures intrigued him.

The moon was up when he started down. He took the old cloth sack he always carried and began filling it with leaves. By the time he was back, the sack was full and the moon straight

overhead. He sorted through his collection and added them to the pile, Manzanita here, Madrone there, and the sharp edged live oak to hold them all together. When he was done, he went inside and slept.

He woke with his heart pounding in his chest. It was there, faint but sure, straight from the southwest. He listened carefully, comparing the sequence of numbers with those he had carried in his mind for so long; it was a perfect match. The signal stopped. He knew it would repeat in exactly twelve hours. As a precaution, he would wait for that last confirmation before going.

He hardly knew what to do. There was nothing he could take with him, so he set about saying goodbye. He walked all day in the forest, climbed up on the mountainside and wandered among its meadows. Late in the day, he left his pile of leaves and walked down to the old barn.

Closed up all these years, it gave off a musty smell as he slid the door open. He had built it just after he and Rose got the place. The tractor and all his tools still sat undisturbed. "Could get right back in it tomorrow," he thought.

He closed the door and started across the field. It was ten acres, long and narrow, and ran tight to the trees that grew along the creek. He could feel the rich soil under his boots. They had grown vegetables here, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, and his favorites, the leafy greens. Rose had lined the edges with cosmos, sunflowers, and zinnias. He remembered the market days, loading up in the dark and then off with Rose at the wheel. He had never liked to drive and hated the thought of an airplane ride. Rose would kid him about it. They would be back in the afternoon with an empty truck to start picking for the next day. It had been a better life than working for the big ranches. He had done that at first, but then used a tiny fraction of the gem's energy to convince a bank to part with this land. It all came back now, clear as if it had been yesterday.

At the creek, he walked downstream to the old bridge. A kingfisher swooped and rattled away. He sat against the bank thinking of how he had planned this out long ago. He knew to the millimeter the distance by water from here to the ship, which now bobbed in the ocean just beyond the bay and to the north, well out of shipping lanes.

The signal came at the agreed time and the code was perfect. At last, he was going home. He stripped off his clothes and hid them under a spicebush that overhung the bank. With a last look across the field and up the hillside, he wrapped his mind around the TetStar and took just less than half the remaining energy. It was dark and no one saw a huge steelhead splash into the creek.

Gone at last—down to the sea in a body of muscle that could outrun any current—he stopped thinking, stopped seeing, forgot hands, forgot feet and learned to move through a world of feel and taste. Time flowed by—water time; marked by gurgles, roars, and splashes. The water was everything; he was in the water, of the water.

The current slowed and then stopped altogether. He went to the bottom, but the water was still and then he remembered the truck. It was supposed to be gone by now. He could dimly sense wheels, pipes, and shiny metal, all plastered with mud and sticks. Water hissed away through small holes but he knew not to follow. He could get trapped and die in such a space. He darted back and forth in the stagnant pool, but there was no way out.

Finally, he came to the surface and let the water slowly carry him. It was shallow, dangerously shallow, and he flipped back and forth. The action sent him sliding across a slick surface, for a moment, he was airborne and then pain shot through him as he struck something hard. He landed in an alien world, dry, and terribly wrong. Thrashing violently, head to tail, he threw himself into the air. He needed to breathe and his twists became more desperate.

He couldn't fail here. Coated with grit, he bounced onto a flat rock and slid mercifully into the shallows. He swam deeper and lay bruised on the bottom where eddies stirred him like a reed.

Weak light seeped through muddy water and told him it was morning. He rose into the current and let it carry him along. The creek widened and matured into a river and, after a while, he could taste salt. The pain from his bruises faded as he started across the bay. He could feel other steelhead moving with him, and not understanding how a school worked, tried to distance himself, but they stayed close. The day passed and then he sensed the homing device that would take him to the ship. He was in the deep ocean now and tried to watch for large shapes.

"Mik." They should be able to read him from this distance.

"Karro, is that you?" It was Jarn.

"Yes. I'm closing in, should be right under you in a few minutes. Brother, what took you so long? I almost gave you up."

"Mik isn't here. He had something he had to do. We'll pick him up on the way back."

Karro felt a keen disappointment. It was good to be talking with his own kind but he had missed his brother. *"I will be there,"* he had said. What could have been more important than this? The dreamer in him glimpsed a nightmare. He circled slowly up toward the ship. Other fish swam with him.

"Did you bring the net?" It was on the list and it would be a lot easier than trying to leap onto the ship.

"Right here. Swim alongside and we'll bring you in. It must be awful being down there in that muck." The voice was eager, too eager, and where was Mik?

"Not too bad actually." Something made him wait. He looked around to see that five other steelhead were with him. "I'm swimming with four others so get us all."

He came to the surface with a rush. As the net swept towards him, he dove beneath it with a flick of his tail.

"I'm in."

"We got him." It was Linok.

Five fish flopped out on the deck. The two figures fell on them with knives.

Just under the surface, Karros watched, horrified, as the two figures hacked each fish apart.

"It's a metal box, can't be that hard to find."

A sick feeling of betrayal flooded over him. They had gotten Mik out of the way somehow and had come to take the TetStar. Anger replaced the shock. "Where's my brother?"

They froze in their dissecting.

"What did you do with him?" The anger made him careless and he rose higher in the water.

"There he is." Jarn reached for a weapon and Karros dove. The surface boiled, driving him deep to where light was but a whisper and the vibrations of their frantic search just a soft echo. He imagined them hauling in every dead thing floating. He swam away and after a time surfaced at a safe distance. The wind had increased and the rough waves made it easier to hide. Not easier on them, he realized. If the weather picked up just a little more, they would have to activate the ship to keep it stable.

He sent a thought. "Jarn, one third is better than nothing. Give it up, you won't catch me."

There was silence and then, "Come on in, we'll split it fairly. That was all we ever wanted."

"I need to have the ship secure first. Launch yourself in the life vessel and move off, and

we have a deal." It was a long shot. Even if they agreed, he knew nothing of these ships. They would have to operate it and he would be at their mercy for the long trip back. And then there was still the question of Mik.

"No, we can't leave the ship. Trust us, Karro. We can't get back with the gem without each other. We'll go inside and leave you a weapon; jump on deck and change form and we can go. You'll be safe, and then we can all take the gem back to sell to the highest bidder. Think of the fortune waiting for us."

Yes, the fortune—somehow long ago, he had stopped thinking about it. "What did you do with Mik?" He had to know.

"Nothing. I told you he's waiting for us. We pick him up at our third jump point. Come on in so we can get started. You don't want to spend forever in this awful place."

"Let me think a minute."

"Well, hurry, the weather's changing."

He measured again the energy in the gem. It was close, very close. He could only use the smallest amount or risk spending his days in the ocean. He came up directly under the ship and moved close until he could rub against the smooth metal hull. He focused his attention on the interior while his mind skimmed from the Tetstar the smallest grain of energy. For a second the ship was transparent, open as if of glass, and his mind took a snapshot. He sank down, sick inside. A body with most of its chest blasted away lay on the floor. It was Mik. He should have known. They would have needed him to get the ship. He swam away until he came to a kelp bed.

"Jarns. I'm ready to come in, but you'll have to pick me up."

"Great, we can do that; we're under power now."

Karro could feel the waves rising and falling as he talked the vessel to him. They detected the rocks much too late. Even from his protected vantage point, he could tell it was a spectacular wreck. When it was safe, he swam through the debris seeking the energy held in the ship. The Gem of Gems could gather it, but there was little, very little, nothing like the amount to get him home. He sank, without hope, to drift alone in the darkness.

Later the tide overcame the current and swept him back into the bay. A faint taste of fresh water jogged a memory and he began to swim, aimlessly at first, and then with purpose.

* * *

Sitting with his back against the old barn, the man held a thin stone in one hand and bright steel in the other. It was midday. The air was still and the fields and woods quiet. He ran the stone across the blade in a slow even rhythm. It helped warm him and wash away the cold, the deep terrible cold he had brought out of the creek. He was stronger now. The memory of the struggle against the icy current was fading.

He had rested in a quiet pool under the bridge and, when darkness fell, made the change. Splashing to the bank, he staggered up the hill to collapse. He woke a new man. He found clothes that fit and, with a can of olives and some stale bread, had walked down to the barn. No one was coming for him now. No one knew where he was.

He sat sharpening the blade. He'd start with the field. Reclaim it. He looked down at his unwrinkled hands and lost himself in the singing of stone on steel. He didn't hear the car. Shadows moved into his view and he looked up at two figures.

"Hi—I'm Jed, Jed Evans." The man paused, letting him stand. He set the machete aside. "And this is Offi…ah… Heather Sanchez."

He wasn't ready for company. He couldn't hear right, and when he tried to focus on them, he was still looking through water. He tried a smile. "Miguel." His first word startled him. It came out deep and rich like shadows in the creek bottom. They exchanged soft handshakes.

"Is Carlos around? I take him to town on Friday mornings, been doing it for a long time now, but today he wasn't here."

His eyes were going in and out of focus, but he could see that Jed was uncomfortable. He kept shifting from one foot to the other and glancing around. The woman was still and calm. He thought he should know her.

"No", and his mind began to function, "he had a stroke—we sent him to stay with his granddaughter in El Paso."

"Oh...that's awful. Sorry to hear that," and after a pause. "When did it happen?"

"Last Saturday. He wanted to stay but..." he let the words drift off. "He was my great-uncle." There was an awkward silence, so he went on. "I'm going to stay and farm a little—he wanted that."

"Oh yes, he would like that." It was Jed again. "How…who found him?"

Halos were in front of his eyes, but his mind was back. "He was doing something on the bridge when it happened. A guy driving over to the interstate saw him and called an ambulance. Somebody phoned my aunt and we flew up the next day. I think they're going to move him to Tampa next week." That should take care of Jed, but he wasn't sure about the woman.

"Say…you got a car? I don't see one." Jed's head was twisting around.

"Not yet, but there's an old truck here that I'll get running in a few days."

"Look, if you need anything, I'm just down the road. Give a holler. I go into town on Fridays. Be glad to give you a ride."

He smiled. "Thanks. That'd be great—I appreciate it."

The woman hadn't said anything, and her gaze made him uncomfortable.

Jed shuffled around some more. "Well, we should be going—I'm sure you got a lot to do." He made a move toward the car.

"If you should talk to Carlos, tell him hello for us." It was Officer Sanchez and he recognized her now. How small she looked out of uniform.

"I'll do that. And thank you."

"What will you grow?" she asked. It was a kind voice with a big smile.

He moved his eyes away from her face and looked out across the field. It swam before him, an unkempt riot of green, and then he saw it all. "Around the edge,"—he paused to wave a hand—"cosmos, sunflowers, zinnias. Everywhere else vegetables—carrots, tomatoes, peppers—and my favorites, leafy greens."

She smiled, "I'd like to see that."

# The End

*Ian lives in northern California where he teaches high school, writes short stories, and tends a vineyard of wine grapes.*

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

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Your Ladyship, I could not agree more with your suggestion.

Indeed, meeting His Highness five days a week after lunch will be no problem at all. It will be my honor to re-schedule my other work. I'm sure His Highness will progress faster with frequent smaller lessons rather than one or two longer lessons a week. In fact, repetition will be important to get the basics of the language, in order to build a strong foundation for later work.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

7th Old Spring

Your Ladyship, of course I understand that His Highness had to cancel two meetings this week. The press of state business and all the preparations for the visit must weigh heavily on his mind. The Prince is learning the basic sound system well, and has even grasped the crucial hLa vs. hLA distinction. The coming week's lessons will begin with basic pleasantries, as appropriate to one of his exalted station.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

14th Old Spring

Indeed, your Ladyship, learning Elvish is a slow process. It is a difficult language to learn as an adult. I assure you that the "time wasted memorizing six different ways to greet someone" is necessary. After all, first impressions are vital. The Elvish Court is known for its disdain of those who cannot or will not learn the correct basics of their language and protocol.

I am at His Highness's service and hope to see him more than twice this coming week.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

21st Old Spring

Your Ladyship, I was able to meet with His Highness three times this week, although two of our meetings started a bit late. I am pleased to report that his grasp of the basics is improving, and we continue to progress.

May I mention, [it is awkward, but I must] really I do not think the presence of Lady Eteri is very helpful. While she is a graceful and charming young woman, her presence is not conducive to the greatest concentration on His Highness's part.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

28th Old Spring

Your Ladyship, I am delighted to report His Highness is taking an interest in Elvish.

Classes this week went well, and His Highness is doing well in polite request and response forms.

I was very pleased when he mentioned he had obtained an Elvish—Rhen-li dictionary and had been looking through it.

Could you please check that it is the Venli-Torin Dictionary, by the Rhenha University Press, and not the Tilsena version published by the Royal Rhen-li Society? As I mentioned to His Highness, the Tilsena dictionary, while popular, lacks vital information on the pragmatics of Elvish.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

7th New Summer

I am touched by Your Ladyship's concern, but it would be a delight for me to accompany the diplomatic mission to The Westlands. I am sorry to hear about Jiln Venri's accident and wish him a speedy recovery. I will make sure my schedule is clear and I am ready to leave on the first of Old Summer.

I believe His Highness is truly looking forward to this historic trip. At various times during classes this week he asked many questions about my childhood in The Westlands, the music and dancing of the Elvish Court, and my family situation here and in the Westlands, all of which I endeavored to answer to the best of my ability.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

14th New Summer

Your Ladyship, I apologize and offer you my resignation.

You are correct. Yelling: "Lay a hand on me again and you'll draw back a bloody stump!" was not the most diplomatic way to handle the situation.

May I recommend either Tira Matr or Siir Senlin at the University as possible replacements for myself?

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

15th New Summer

Well, yes, I agree that mere personal emotions should not stand in the way of preparations for this historic trip. The chance of these two great nations resuming official relations after such a long estrangement is something we all hope for.

However, Your Ladyship, I insist on the presence of a chaperone during future lessons.

While I am most honored to be an employee of the Royal Court of Rhen-li, I am not employed in *that* position.

AW

21st New Summer

I am pleased to tell you that His Highness's basic Elvish is adequate. He does have musical talent and a good ear, which enable him to perceive the tonal differences and slight slurs that form such an important part of Elvish.

We have no lessons scheduled next week, and will leave on the first of Old Summer. I will endeavor to continue teaching His Highness as we travel.

I hope that the land I grew up in and my beloved Rhen-li can forge closer ties from this historic trip.

Humbly,
Alliana Woodgreen

9th Old Summer

Via Imperial Diplomatic Post
Without Delay, Urgent
To: Thalitza, Lady Winterham

Look, I told him to study, I warned him about the stupid dictionary, I even warned him about drinking too much at the state dinner!

Then he stands up in front of the entire State Dinner and says, "Tha ^tle, ein to tai mahans^la, li." I DID NOT TEACH HIM THAT. Mahansla is peace, mahans^la is... reproduction. They do come from a common root, since peacetime was traditionally the safest time to bear and raise children.

He told the august assembled company, "It's a good time to screw, gracious ones, join me."

Your Ladyship, kindly have my final fees forwarded to me care of the Main Office of The Elflands Merchant Bank, Westspring, Westlands.

Alliana Woodgreen

# The End

*A newish writer, but not a new person, Margaret's first degree was in accounting. Twenty-odd years later, she went back for a master's in education—ESL (no, not *Elvish* as a Second Language!). She's a martial artist with rank in this and that. She currently teaches college English.*

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